Living with Jesus: Practical Christologies in Two Boston American Baptist Churches

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LIVING WITH JESUS: PRACTICAL CHRISTOLOGIES IN TWO BOSTON AMERICAN BAPTIST CHURCHES

by

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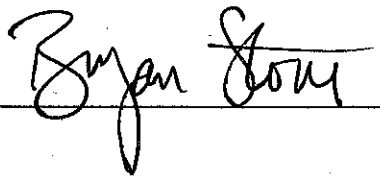
First Reader 

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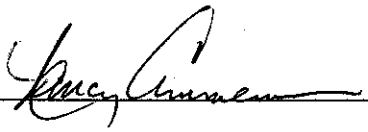
Second Reader 

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The writing of a dissertation is in many ways a focused and solitary process. An aspiring scholar must assume responsibility to research the project that he or she has proposed, reflect upon the findings in the light of relevant literature, and finally commit ideas and words to paper to be scrutinized by others. Yet, the writing of a dissertation is also a collaborative venture that benefits greatly from the support and interest of fellow travelers in the realm of academic study and from friends and family. Good company makes a huge difference to the outcome of a major writing project.

"Living with Jesus" would not have been possible without the cooperation of First Baptist Church in Jamaica Plain and Ruggles Baptist Church. I am grateful to Pastor Ashlee Wiest-Laird (First Baptist) and Pastor Larry Showalter (Ruggles) for their assistance and interest in the project, and to the members at both churches that agreed to be interviewed by me. I trust that these communities of faith find accurate portraits of their life and witness presented in the pages that follow. My hope is that "Living with Jesus" may stimulate creative and constructive reflection helpful to both congregations as they seek to follow Jesus Christ in worship, mission, and daily life.

I wish to record my thanks to Rev. Dr. Bryan Stone and Dr. Nancy Ammerman for their patient stewardship of "Living with Jesus". Writing an interdisciplinary dissertation has required the close attention of two scholars in the front rank of their respective fields of expertise. I am grateful for their insights, words of encouragement, prodding, and wise advice. The project now before the reader is immeasurably better

than it otherwise would be, because of the enthusiastic and diligent labors of two conscientious and creative scholars. Since the Atlantic Ocean separated me from my advisors for the duration of the time I spent writing the project, apart from one brief visit to Boston in the spring of 2010, most of the conversation about this dissertation has been conducted by e-mail. Electronic mail is no substitute, in my opinion, for embodied conversation, but it does facilitate communication across large distances and disparate time zones. There is no doubt about its great value to a student working away from the educational institution to which he or she is accountable.

James Ashdown and Alastair McKay took up the invitation to form a study group to exchange ideas, read papers, and talk over tea and cake in the autumn of 2007. Their company and critical reflection over the last three years have been stimulating and encouraging. I hope they feel the same way about me! A graduate student (or at least this particular graduate student) needs peace and quiet to think and write. I have never mastered the ability of writing with noise around me. Fortunately, for me, the London Mennonite Centre has provided an oasis of calm and hospitality in which to pursue "Living with Jesus". In great measure, the atmosphere at the London Mennonite Centre is a reflection of the people who live and work in it. I am grateful for the warm welcome, hospitality, and conversation extended to me by Ed and Phyllis Shirk, Darrell and Barbara Jantz, Will Newcomb, Kim Broodie, Sam Moyer, Kathy, Vic, and Janelle Theissen.

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LIVING WITH JESUS: PRACTICAL CHRISTOLOGIES

IN TWO BOSTON AMERICAN BAPTIST CHURCHES

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation, an exercise in practical theology, undertakes two tasks. First, it examines how the story of Jesus is appropriated and embodied in the corporate practices of worship and mission (congregational christology) and in the daily lives of ordinary believers (everyday christology) at First Baptist Church in Jamaica Plain and Ruggles Baptist Church in Boston, Massachusetts. Second, it places these practical christologies in dialogue with the academic christology of James McClendon to see what creative and critical insights emerge.

A key assumption of the study is that doctrinal reflection is precipitated when the story of Jesus interacts with human stories in both autobiographical and public domains. "Living with Jesus" contends that the understandings of Jesus present in the everyday lives of believers and in a congregation's worship and mission merit the attention of scholars in the disciplines of sociology and theology.

This dissertation demonstrates that scholarly research on the visible church, everyday religion, and Christian doctrine pays limited attention to the theologies operative in the everyday lives of believers and congregational practices. A gap exists in scholarly knowledge, which "Living with Jesus" attempts to redress.

The empirical results of qualitative research fieldwork are set in the context of historical overviews and contemporary snapshots of First Baptist Church in Jamaica Plain and Ruggles Baptist Church. "Living with Jesus" identifies three types of practical christology operative across the two congregations in corporate practices and the everyday lives of individuals: evangelical christology; exemplarist christology; and prophetic christology. The empirical research shows that for a significant minority of people in the sample, the prevailing understanding of Jesus can best be described as a hybrid christology.

By paying attention to McClendon's treatment of the Jesus story and placing the three identified practical christologies in dialogue with his christology, it becomes apparent that each practical christology is simultaneously liberating and limiting. This dissertation argues that evaluating a particular practical christology in relation to the Gospel requires an intentional and disciplined effort on the part of congregations, ordinary believers, and theologians. Questions are proposed to assist further christological reflection on worship, mission, pastoral care, and Christian education.

CHAPTER ONE

THE STORY OF JESUS CHRIST AND OUR STORIES

Christians have two unique stories to tell. The first is the story of Jesus Christ. The second is the story of how we ourselves experience God.[1]

Statement of the Problem

This study asks two distinct but related questions of Baptist Christians. First, how is the story of Jesus Christ (the Gospel) encountered, understood, appropriated, and embodied amidst the contingencies of human experience? Second, what critical and creative insights ensue from placing the beliefs about Jesus Christ embodied in both a congregation's practices of faith and the daily lives of believers in dialogue with a systematic theological account of the person and work of Jesus Christ?

The roots of this dissertation can be traced to my experience of ministry and mission in London, England. Over the course of fourteen years, I worked first as an evangelist with the London City Mission[2] on a mainly white working class housing estate in West Croydon (1987-1988), then as a youth worker and assistant to the minister in an African-Caribbean Baptist congregation in Brixton (1988-1991), and finally as the pastor of a multiethnic Baptist congregation in Battersea (1991-2001). In witnessing to the Gospel on doorsteps, teaching the basics of the Christian faith in small groups, sharing

[1] John Finney, *Finding Faith Today: How Does It Happen?* (Bible Society: Swindon, 1992),viii.

[2] The London City Mission is an interdenominational urban mission agency. A brief account of the London City Mission's history and contemporary work can be found at its website: www.lcm.org.uk.

the joys and sorrows of Christians grappling with daily life, working with deacons in decision making, leading public worship on Sundays, engaging with responses to preaching, experiencing the informal conversations that habitually crop up in the course of pastoral relationships, exposure to the diversity of Baptist churches in London, and worshipping with ecumenical partners, I was struck by three recurring themes.

First, the theologies expressed in the visible church[3] (the tangible life and witness of a Christian congregation) varied considerably both within denominations and across the spectrum of Christian traditions. For example, public worship influenced by charismatic renewal frequently forgot God the Father in the process of exalting the Son and the Holy Spirit. Anglican and Methodist liturgies incorporated Trinitarian language in public worship as an essential ingredient. Explicitly Trinitarian language was harder to detect in Baptist and New Church patterns of worship. The sermons preached to the congregations I worshipped with conveyed the person and work of Jesus Christ in startlingly different guises. The worship and mission of congregations scattered across London reflected diverse understandings of God, Jesus Christ, and the Christian life. I was intrigued. The plurality of

[3] A. T. Hanson argues that in the New Testament the Pauline tradition assumes the visibility of the church and the Johannine tradition implies the invisibility of the church. In the Patristic era Augustine made a conceptual distinction between the invisible church (the company of all genuine Christians known to God alone that is destined for eschatological communion with God) and the visible church (the mixed community of true and nominal Christians situated in time and space). See A. T. Hanson, "Invisible Church, Visible Church," in *A Dictionary of Christian Theology*, ed. Alan Richardson (London: SCM Press, 1969), 173-175. In the context of this dissertation, the term "visible church" refers to the empirical reality or tangible life and witness of a Christian congregation. The social entity designated by the term "visible church" is a complex reality with sociological and theological dimensions.

interpretations of Jesus Christ on offer was especially striking. What accounted for the understanding(s) of Jesus Christ evident in the worship and mission of any given congregation? How might I begin to identify and map the understanding(s) of Jesus Christ espoused and operative in the life and witness of a congregation?

Second, the everyday religion (the religious beliefs and practices embodied in daily life) of ordinary Christians sometimes coincided with the theology embedded in the sermons preached to a congregation, the hymns or spiritual songs sung in public worship, the creeds recited in set forms of liturgy, and the official theology endorsed by a denomination, but not always. The beliefs and practices of ordinary Christians, when they stepped briefly into the spotlight as part of pastoral conversations, group discussions, or incidents in church life, especially if they diverged from Christian orthodoxy, were challenging and intriguing.[4] Some ordinary Christians struggled to give voice to central tenets of the Christian faith. When an invitation to clarify personal beliefs was extended it was frequently greeted with silence or vague speech. Exactly what somebody did believe to be true about God, Jesus Christ, and the Christian life in such cases was very difficult to discern. On the other hand, many notions of the person and work of Jesus Christ articulated in the everyday lives of believers perplexed me. Again, I found my curiosity aroused. How had individual Christians first encountered the story of Jesus Christ? Is the Gospel story continuing

[4] For example, I heard God addressed as "Father Jesus" in prayer meetings. Now and then people active in church life for many years might express doubt in the atoning efficacy of the cross or the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. On one occasion, I discovered a well-meaning church member had been depositing copies of Jehovah's Witness publications on a free-literature table in the vestibule of a place of Christian worship for fellow church members to peruse and possibly take home.

to shape their lives today? How is the faith confessed by individuals, whether clearly defined or faintly sketched, translated into the practicalities of daily life?

Third, I struggled to connect the theologies embodied in the concrete church and everyday religion with the academic theology I had acquired in the course of my preparation for pastoral ministry. At one level the problem I faced was one of practicality: how might two very different types of theological discourse interact with one another? The theologies at work in congregations and individual lives are formed within complex webs of human experience. Such lived theology is conveyed primarily in stories and practices. Academic theology, on the other hand, is fashioned in the abstract realm of scholarly learning and articulated in conceptual categories. My theological education schooled me in biblical studies, church history, and Christian doctrine. I knew how to exegete scripture, but lacked the means to "exegete" the church and the individual lives placed into my care.[5] My program of study equipped me to be attentive to the human dynamics of faith only in the narrow context of one-to-one pastoral care. Distilling the theologies present in congregational practices and everyday lives into categories capable of engaging with academic theology proved to be elusive. Indeed, the value of mapping the contours of a local church culture, including the theologies embodied in congregational practices and individual lives, dawned only hesitantly within my theological imagination. Little in the academic theology I read acknowledged or attached much

[5] Seminary students in the United States also were not equipped to map the local cultures of the congregations they would eventually be called to serve. See James Wind, "Leading Congregations, Discovering Congregational Cultures," *Christian Century* 110, no. 4 (1993): 105-110.

significance to the theologies I would actually encounter in the work of pastoral ministry.

A key component of academic theology is the study of Christian doctrine or teachings. The programs of academic theology I experienced as part of my preparation for pastoral ministry stressed the importance of Christian doctrine for stimulating and safeguarding the spiritual health of the church. A Christian's concept or image of God, for example, has profound implications for the way in which the Christian life is understood, communicated, appropriated, and experienced.[6] A critical assumption of the academic theology I studied is that Christian doctrine functions as a creative and critical resource to shape the Christian understanding of God and the practical outworking of Christian faith; it is an accumulating deposit of wisdom to guide Christians in living before God. Yet, academic theology, the forum where the Christian doctrinal tradition is studied and articulated, primarily in abstract language, symbols, and ideas, offers few resources to relate Christian doctrine to the Christian life. In time I came to view my limited capacity to connect the theologies embedded in stories and practices with the conceptual categories of academic theology, utilized to articulate Christian doctrine, as a hindrance to faithful and competent pastoral ministry. It seems to me that if Christian doctrine is to be of any service to the visible church and the everyday religion of Christians, those charged

[6] Contemporary literature in the field of pastoral care explores the impact of concepts and images of God upon human experience in the Christian life. Perceptive analyses include: Alastair V. Campbell, *Rediscovering Pastoral Care* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1981) and Carrie Doehring, *The Practice of Pastoral Care: A Postmodern Approach* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006).

with leading congregations must be able to mediate Christian doctrine to the specific contexts in which they are called to serve. It follows that for Christian doctrine to function as a critical and constructive resource in the Christian life, it is necessary for lived theology and academic theology to converse with each other.

This dissertation connects the visible church, everyday religion, and Christian doctrine to generate a critical and creative resource for practical Christian living. It does so by exploring the significance of Jesus Christ for the lived religion[7] of Baptist Christians and engaging in dialogue with a systematic theological interpretation of Jesus Christ. "Living with Jesus: Practical Christologies in Two Boston American Baptist Churches"[8] pursues two central tasks. First, the project identifies the beliefs about the person and work of Jesus Christ (christology) present in the congregational worship and mission of two Baptist churches in Boston and the daily lives of the people belonging to them. Second, it places these beliefs and the practices that embody them in dialogue with the christology of the Baptist theologian James McClendon.

The Significance of the Study

By identifying the understandings of Jesus Christ embodied in the worship and mission of two Baptist congregations in Boston, Massachusetts, and in the everyday beliefs and practices of the people who belong to these communities of faith, this

[7] Lived religion refers to the complex reality of religion in peoples' lives; it consists of an interconnected web of beliefs, practices, and experience. In this project the lived religion of Baptist Christians encompasses the visible church and everyday religion.

[8] This dissertation is referred to as "Living with Jesus" from this point forward.

study expands scholarly knowledge about the perceptions of Jesus Christ present in the visible church and everyday religion within the United States. The existing state of scholarship in sociology and theology is notable for a paucity of knowledge about the perspectives on Jesus Christ embedded in lived religion. The scholars most interested in the human dynamics of Christian faith, sociologists of religion and practical theologians, have invested negligible time and energy in studying the theological work done at the level of congregational worship and mission. Even less effort has been expended on exploring the beliefs and practices present in the everyday lives of believers. Systematic theologians interested in the visible church and everyday religion are justified in pointing out that little research into the empirical reality of lived religion is available to facilitate meaningful conversation between the theologies embodied in lived religion and systematic statements about the person and work of Jesus Christ.[9]

Western theologians today are more aware than earlier generations of Christian scholars that culture shapes theology, including beliefs about Jesus Christ,[10] and the contours of Christian life and witness. The agenda that academic theology pursues, when it does consider the church and its engagement with contemporary society, is generally preoccupied with intellectual problems generated within the ranks of the intelligentsia and big ideas that drive prominent cultural movements.

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[9] Wesley J. Wildman, *Fidelity with Plausibility: Modest Christologies in the Twentieth Century* (New York: SUNY, 1998), 13-14.

[10] Colin J. D. Greene, *Christology in Cultural Perspective: Marking the Horizons* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2003); Jaroslav Pelikan, *Jesus Through the Centuries: His Place in the History of Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985).

Academic theology frequently makes assumptions about the society it seeks to address, the church it aspires to serve, and the mindsets of people in church and society.[11] Yet, professional theologians do not typically engage with the theologies constituent of lived religion. Most critical reflection on the person and work of Jesus Christ that takes place within the guild of professional theologians occurs without reference to lived religion. This dissertation advances scholarship by starting to fill a gap in knowledge about the nature of everyday religion and the visible church; it examines the role of beliefs about Jesus Christ in shaping religious identities and practice. The project gives voice to people and beliefs in the church usually overlooked in the academy by attending to the stories of congregations and individual Christians.

The rationale for concentrating on beliefs about Jesus Christ is simple. He is central to Christianity.[12] Jesus Christ is essential to the Christian experience and knowledge of God. The New Testament witnesses to Jesus Christ as the fulfillment of promises made by God in the Old Testament, the agent of God's kingdom breaking in to this present age, and the One who reveals God most clearly to humankind. Jesus Christ is exalted as the Savior of the world and Lord of the Cosmos. The early church, on the basis of its experience, continued to place Jesus Christ at the centre of its thinking in the four centuries immediately following the New Testament era.

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[11] Robin Gill, *The Social Context of Theology* (London: Mowbrays, 1975), 43-54, 67-79.

[12] The literature on Jesus Christ is vast. A good introduction is Leslie Houlden, ed., *Jesus: The Complete Guide* (London: Continuum, 2005).

Indeed, the early church concentrated much of its energy on defining the person of Jesus Christ ("truly human, truly divine") and developing the Christian concept of God as Trinity ("One God in three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit") in the light of its understanding of Jesus Christ. To this day Christian doctrine acknowledges Jesus Christ to be vital for grasping the true identity and purposes of God. Christian mission and worship through the centuries has afforded prominence to the person and work of Jesus Christ. He is at the heart of the proclamation the church makes as it participates in God's mission to the world, a constant feature of the church's message.[13] Christian worship exalts the person and work of Jesus Christ. Christianity without Jesus Christ is nonsensical. It is, therefore, pertinent for the scholar interested in the lived religion of Christians to comprehend the place occupied by Jesus Christ in the visible church and everyday religion. This project aims to portray beliefs about Jesus Christ implicit and explicit in the stories and practices of congregations and individual lives. Furthermore, it seeks to understand how these stories interact with the story of Jesus Christ (the Gospel) in shaping culture and identity in the visible church and everyday religion.

A study of the person and place of Jesus Christ in the visible church and everyday religion is especially appropriate to Baptist Christians. Living under the rule of Christ is a key theme in Baptist faith and practice. What does it mean to live before God as faithful followers of Jesus Christ? Baptists have repeatedly sought to

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[13]Stephen B. Bevans and Roger P. Schroeder, *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 32-72.

answer this question in all the many contexts they have inhabited since first appearing on the ecclesiastical landscape in 1609. Baptists continue to revisit this fundamental question today.[14]

A second feature of "Living with Jesus" is that it enables dialogue between different types of theological discourse. Theology means literally "talk about God". Christian theology articulates Christian beliefs about God and the meaning of these beliefs for the Christian life. Theology is often associated with professional theologians and clergy, and assumed to be an intellectual activity that formulates abstract theories about God beyond the comprehension of many ordinary Christians. In fact, thinking about God is not the preserve of a highly educated minority confined to academic institutions. The empirical reality is that theological activity ranges over a spectrum of people and contexts.[15] Many different kinds of theological discourse or "talk about God" exist. These various ways of talking about God overlap, intersect, and interact with one another. They constitute a continuum. Each category of theological discourse identified by this project demonstrates features peculiar to its particular mode of operation[16] and simultaneously manifests similarities in its operation to the others.[17] Rarely are these discrete forms of theological discourse intentionally placed in conversation with one another. This project examines three

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[14] Paul S. Fiddes, ed., *Under the Rule of Christ: Dimensions of Baptist Spirituality* (Oxford and Macon, GA: Regent's Park College with Smyth and Helwys, 2008).

[15] Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 69-72.

[16] Ibid., 80-82.

[17] Ibid., 83-86.

types of theological discourse and sets up a creative and critical dialogue between them. Theologies formed in the overlapping orbits of daily life (everyday theology) and congregational practices (congregational theology) engage in conversation with a theology formulated in the lecture halls of seminaries (academic theology).

Everyday theology is the theological work done by an ordinary Christian and the religious beliefs forged by him or her in the contingent circumstances of the visible church and everyday religion. It is common for experience of practical difficulties in life and challenges to the way of faith to stimulate moments of theological activity. Everyday theology is precipitated by and shaped in response to immediate life situations and the active questioning of faith. Curiosity about the veracity of the Christian faith, the birth of a child, marriage, bereavement, illness, adversity, injustice, intellectual challenges to Christian truth claims, experience of alien cultures, and moral dilemmas may all serve to disturb settled understandings of God, Jesus Christ, and the Christian life. The occasional and haphazard nature of everyday theology tends to result in fragmentary, sometimes contradictory, clusters of beliefs. Once stability has been restored to daily life and the way of faith, the perceived need for ongoing theological reflection often recedes until new practical difficulties or challenges to Christian faith arise. Everyday theology is mostly conveyed in stories and practices.

Congregational theology is the theological work done by a congregation and the religious beliefs expressed in its story and corporate practices of worship and mission. Any or all of these elements can be significant factors in the formation of

the everyday theologies that are hammered out by the individual members of a congregation. A congregation's past and present story, and the way that it makes sense of both its inheritance and present life, offers clues to a church's theological self-understanding. Does the corporate memory look back with sadness to a Golden Age from which the congregation has slipped or does it celebrate a journey from "Hard Times" in the past to a better place in the present? Is the character of a church defined by the locality it identifies with or the denomination it belongs to? What theological markers are positively embraced, and which are disavowed?

Public worship offers significant insights into the theological identity and priorities of a congregation. The theology embodied in the patterns and practices of a congregation's corporate worship constitutes an important statement of its theological self-understanding. In part, this dissertation is an exercise in liturgical theology, the study of corporate worship to establish elements of the theology actually operative in a congregation.[18] The hymns, songs, prayers, bible readings, personal testimonies, dramas, music, and sermons that make up public worship proclaim the corporate theological beliefs of a congregation. A style of worship is indicative of theological commitments; it may also hint at social, political, and cultural beliefs widely shared among those who gather for worship.

Alongside public worship a congregation's practice of mission is important for comprehending its theological self-understanding. A church's mode of presence in a neighborhood gives an indication of how it understands its mission. How does a

[18] Christopher J. Ellis, *Gathering: A Theology and Spirituality of Worship in Free Church Tradition* (London: SCM Press, 2004), 13-24.

congregation respond to ethnic diversity and religious pluralism on its doorstep and in the social lives of members? The use to which a house of worship is put from Monday to Saturday can indicate the nature of a church's understanding of its mission. Who is a congregation prepared to partner with, Christian or otherwise, in common cause? What kind of activities, if any, is a church prepared to participate in alongside neighbors? Does a church exhibit a silent witness that seeks to demonstrate the love of God through acts of goodness and compassion or seek to find ways of proclaiming the Gospel story verbally by offering opportunities for the curious to discover more about the meaning of Christianity? The church's practice of mission embodies understandings of God, Jesus Christ, and the Christian life, which are just as significant for the life of a congregation as anything it expresses in public worship.

Congregational theology is a hybrid form of theological discourse, because it frequently emerges out of an interplay between the experience and thinking of ordinary Christians, on the one hand, and more abstract theological ideas, language, and symbols derived from denominational materials, theological resources, and the critical reflection of theologically educated leaders, on the other hand.

Academic theology is the theological work and religious beliefs formulated by professional theologians, a relatively small group of specialists trained to probe and explicate Christian tradition. Academic theology is distinct from everyday and congregational theologies by virtue of the fact that it is undertaken in educational institutions, seminaries and universities, which afford theologians time and space to reflect rigorously upon the Christian tradition and the contemporary world. The

practice of academic theology proceeds according to standards of logic, coherence, evidence, and consistency cultivated within theology as a discipline and demanded by the institutions that a theologian works within and the academic communities he or she belongs to. Academic theology articulates Christian teaching in conceptual categories and has a long history of dialogue with the disciplines of philosophy and history.

More recently academic theology has entered into dialogue with social theory and the natural sciences. Theology has begun to appropriate insights from cultural studies. Identifying the origins of Christianity, making sense of the Old and New Testaments, tracing the development of Christian thought through the centuries, constructing systematic frameworks for thinking about God, addressing philosophical problems posed by human experience, and interacting with influential cultural movements are key concerns of academic theology. It must be acknowledged that life experience; attempts to enter into serious conversation with contemporary society, and a desire to be of service to church and society all contribute to the production of much academic theology. Many academic theologians are actively involved in preparing men and women for Christian ministry and mission. Yet, the fact remains, that engaging with the empirical church and the actual practice of Christian faith in daily life are not typically high priorities for academic theology. Happily, there are signs that this state of affairs is beginning to change, a phenomenon examined in the literature review that follows in Chapter Two.

The immediate task, however, is to consider the nature and purpose of theology in more detail. Theology in all its various manifestations is, in essence, "talk about God". How is it possible to "talk about God"? What is the point of speaking about God?

The Nature and Purpose of Christian Theology

Christian theology or "talk about God" is built on the premise that it makes sense to speak about God only because God freely chooses to make God's own being known to us. Unless God takes the initiative to engage with human beings our knowledge of God and God's ways remains negligible. God is not an object that can be put under a microscope, examined and categorized. The mystery of God is inscrutable to human endeavors. God must, therefore, approach us and make God's being, character, and purposes accessible in terms we can grasp in order for us to apprehend God. The Christian witness is that God has encountered people at specific times and places, especially in events critical to the emergence and subsequent history of ancient Israel, supremely in the person and work of Jesus Christ, and also notably in the genesis of the early church. These events were experienced as moments in time when God showed God's *very self* to people, making known God's holy love and intentions for creation. Revelation, therefore, is the self-disclosure, the self-unveiling, of God, rather than a set of propositional statements about God dictated from heaven to human consciousness. A story emerged in response to events in Israel's history, the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and the appearance of a new

community, the church, wherein God was encountered. The Christian story is the product of people reflecting upon these events with the help of the Holy Spirit.

The Christian story is about God's work of creating the universe and God's pursuit of fellowship with human beings. God calls out a particular people, Israel, starting with Abraham, to reflect the divine character and purposes in their life together as a community and to communicate God's promises to all the peoples of the earth. However, Israel repeatedly rebelled against God's purposes and failed to share in God's mission of love to the world. The promises God made in the Old Testament are ultimately fulfilled in Jesus of Nazareth. He lived before God in total trust and obedience, even to the point of death on a cross. God vindicated Jesus by raising him from the dead. The story of Jesus Christ has not ended. He is alive. The risen Jesus makes available the transforming power of God's eternal life to human experience. Christians participate in the resurrection life of Jesus through the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit:

> The story then is the result of meeting this speaking God in many times and places. … The story is human response to revelation, inspired by the Spirit of God. The story is also the place where God's people can encounter God again even as they tell it; the telling of the story is a rendez-vous with the God who desires to be open to us and draw us into the fellowship of God's own life.[19]

The story is not revelation itself but witness to revelation. Yet, the story is also a place to encounter God afresh in the here and now. Thus, for Christians, the

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[19] Paul S. Fiddes, "The Story and the Stories: Revelation and the Challenges of Postmodern Culture," in Paul S. Fiddes, ed. *Faith in the Centre: Christianity and Culture* (Oxford and Macon, GA: Regent's Park College with Smyth and Helwys, 2001), 79-80.

intersection of the story of Jesus Christ with our stories is always potentially an opportunity to be addressed by God through the risen Jesus.

The Christian story is the starting point for doctrine. Christianity emerged within a Semitic cultural context. The New Testament narrates the story of the church's early encounters with Hellenistic culture in the form of Gentile religion and Greek philosophy. In the four centuries following the origins of the church Christians grappled with the cultural milieu of the Hellenistic world. The early church was obliged to engage with conceptual paradigms very different to a Hebrew mindset and notions of divine and human relations depicted in the writings of the Old and New Testaments. Consequently, it became necessary to clarify the meaning of the Christian story and the language used to express it. In reflecting on the story of God's dealings with human beings, especially in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Church Fathers and Ecumenical Councils fashioned a set of teachings to assist the church in living faithfully as disciples of Jesus Christ. Defining the nature of the person of Jesus Christ and the uniquely Christian understanding of God as Trinity were topics of particular concern. These teachings are "relatively stable points in the swirl of ways in which Christians have made sense of their life together."[20] The teachings of the church are known as doctrines, a word derived from the Latin for "teachings" (*docere*). Christian doctrine re-tells the Christian story in conceptual categories and serves to explicate its meaning and implications for the life and witness of the church. Christian doctrine is a resource to guide the church as it wrestles with

[20] Mike Higton, *Christian Doctrine* (London: SCM Press, 2008), 15.

pastoral concerns and challenges posed by its ongoing experience of mission in ever changing cultural contexts.

Christian doctrine is distilled from the Christian story. The movement from story to doctrine is a process of interpretation and imagination on the part of Christian thinkers enabled by the Spirit. In the early church doctrines were developed in the context of Christian communities actively worshipping God and witnessing to the story of Jesus Christ. The practice of Christian doctrine represents a second order of critical reflection on the Christian story that becomes necessary, because the church is constantly being compelled to work out Christian discipleship in new contexts, the specific settings of life experience. In practice, doctrine employs symbols and metaphors, which are central elements of story, to speak of the mystery of God and transcendent realities. "But doctrine uses metaphor in an attempt to *fix* meaning, to define and limit a spectrum of possible interpretations."[21] Story inclines to openness and "doctrine to closure."[22]

Christians are persuaded that God has addressed humankind most clearly and decisively in Jesus Christ. Consequently, the story of Jesus Christ is the focal point for God's speaking to the world. The Christian experience is one of participating in God by indwelling the story of Jesus Christ. It can be argued, therefore, that Christian theology is the art of discerning how to live in the story of Jesus Christ. Theology is

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[21] Paul S. Fiddes, "Concept, Image, and Story in Systematic Theology," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 11, no. 1 (2009): 9.

[22] Ibid.

not primarily about establishing a foundation for belief in the existence of God and constructing abstract theories about God.[23] Instead, theology is fundamentally concerned with helping individuals and communities make "practical sense of their lives in relation to God."[24]

> It is the Christian cultural style to live within the story of Jesus, his life, death and resurrection. But this story has its context in the wider story of Israel, and Christian faith has identified a larger story still, which is summarized in the word 'Trinity'. The Christian idea of God as Trinity is not an abstract concept, a kind of holy and mystical mathematics of one and three. It is the greatest story ever told, the story of a Father who eternally sends out a Son on a mission of creation and healing, in an openness to the future which is the power of the Spirit.[25]

Authentic Christian life is centered on God. Christian identity is defined by the orientation of church and believer to God via Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit.[26] A congregations typically seeks to live within the story of Jesus and so participate in the life of the Triune God by means of a set of corporate practices that includes worship, reading the Bible, baptizing converts, celebrating the Lord's Supper, caring for the sick and vulnerable, instructing the curious about Christianity, nurturing the faith of believers in study groups, sharing in fellowship meals, offering hospitality, working for justice and peace, and witnessing to Jesus Christ:

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[23] Mike Higton, *Christian Doctrine*, 3.

[24] Ibid.

[25] Paul S. Fiddes, "The Place of Theology in the Modern University," *Baptist Quarterly* 42, no. 2: Part 1 (2007): 82-83.

[26] Reinhard Hütter, "The Christian Life," in *The Oxford Handbook of Systematic Theology*, ed. John Webster, Kathryn Tanner, and Ian Torrance, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 285-290.

> Theology emerges whenever Christians seek to go on doing these things in new circumstances, or seek to deal with changes, challenges and conflicts to them, or seek to pass them on to new generations, or to communicate about them or propagate them beyond their existing cultural settings.[27]

Christian theology is a dynamic process of reflection precipitated by the intersection of the story of Jesus Christ with our stories. Attentiveness to the story of Jesus Christ and our human stories is necessary to embark upon critical theological reflection capable of informing congregational practices and everyday religion. This project, therefore, assumes the legitimacy of questioning the status quo or settled understandings of God, Jesus Christ, and the Christian life embodied in congregations and everyday religion by revisiting the story of Jesus Christ and our human stories. Several factors relating to the intersection of the story of Jesus Christ and our stories in the visible church and everyday religion reinforce the validity of this premise.

First, a Christian analysis of the human predicament acknowledges a distinctively religious perspective. Sin is a perennial threat to the life and witness of the church. The term "sin" refers to a rupture in relationship between God and human beings as a consequence of human failure to trust God and walk in obedience according to his purposes for human life. From a Christian point of view the world is not as it should be, because of human rebellion towards God.[28] The Christian doctrine of salvation affirms that God has acted in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ to save and heal human beings from the distortion in their existence caused by

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[27] Mike Higton, *Christian Doctrine*, 12-13.

[28] For an analysis of the complexity of sin see Mark E. Biddle, *Missing the Mark: Sin and Its Consequences in Biblical Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005).

sin. Salvation in Christ delivers us from the ultimate power and consequence of sin, but does not erase its presence from human life. Sin persists in the corporate life of congregations and the personal lives of Christians,[29] pulling them away from the character and purposes of God made known in Jesus Christ.[30] A need exists, therefore, for congregations and Christians to regularly examine themselves in the light of the Gospel to see that they are navigating a course consistent with the claims of the Gospel upon their lives. Grace is the unmerited and freely given goodness of God, yet, grace makes demands upon our lives. God does not bestow the generous love of divine life so that human beings remain paralyzed by sin. God gives God's own self to us so that we may become more like Jesus Christ, who lived in complete trust and obedience in relation to God. Where discrepancies are exposed between what the Gospel demands and what the church practices, changes can be attempted with God's help in relation to beliefs, behavior, and attitude.[31] A church attuned to the reality of sin and seeking to live according to the story of Jesus Christ needs to carefully examine its worship and mission and the everyday lives of believers to guard against complacency, unconsciously giving its allegiance to substitutes for God (idolatry), and delusion. Attentiveness to the story of Jesus Christ and our human

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[29] Nicholas M. Healy, *Church, World and the Christian Life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 7-14; Nigel G. Wright, *New Baptists, New Agenda* (Carlisle, Cumbria: Paternoster Press, 2002), 35-38.

[30] James Wm. McClendon, Jr., *Doctrine: Systematic Theology*, vol. 2 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 129-135.

[31] The doctrine of the Holy Spirit is also a factor when considering the transformation of human lives in Christ.

stories alerts us to the depth of sin in human existence and the potential of grace to transform life. Listening to the story of Jesus Christ in relation to our stories opens the path to confession, the reorienting of human life back to God in the light of the Gospel. God's work of transformation in the life of an individual Christian or a congregation of Christian people is always a work in progress.

Second, a Christian understanding of Scripture is never complete. Scripture is witness to revelation and simultaneously a place to meet God again and again. God may address our lives through Scripture in fresh and surprising ways:

> If the Bible is free to speak in new ways, if the Holy Spirit is free to point out things previously missed, if each church has liberty to hear the hitherto unheard, then we are far from being in a static position.[32]

Christians must always be open to hearing fresh insights and challenges from Scripture, which then need to be translated into the practices of the visible church and the everyday lives of ordinary believers. The tradition of the church inherited from the past is a reservoir of wisdom and knowledge, but it does not "contain the sum total of necessary understanding."[33] Christians live in a "progressive, open-ended situation in which we cannot rest content with what we have known, but must be open to being disturbed by new light and truth."[34]

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[32] Nigel Wright, *Challenge to Change: A Radical Agenda for Baptists* (Eastbourne: Kingsway Publications, 1991), 25.

[33] Ibid.

[34] Ibid.

The separatist congregation in Gainsborough from which the first Baptists and the Pilgrim Fathers[35] trace their origins made a covenant in 1604 by which the members committed themselves together. "As the Lord's free people, they joined themselves by a covenant of the Lord into a church estate, in the fellowship of the gospel to walk in all His ways, made known or to be made known unto them."[36] The members of this congregation did not believe they had a complete grasp of God and divine purposes. They sought always to be faithful to God so far as they understood God's character and purpose and left the door ajar for God to show more of God's self as they encountered God afresh in the testimony of Scripture. Christians discern God's "Word" for their lives by being attentive to the story of God that begins with the creation of the world, continues in the calling of a people, Israel, and is brought to a sharp focus in Jesus Christ, who makes life in relation to God possible. Christians are those who seek to pattern their lives according to the story of Jesus Christ. Faith in Jesus Christ is not merely assent to certain propositional statements. Faith in Jesus Christ is a way of life.[37] Reflecting on Scripture and Christian doctrine in the midst of

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[35] Scripture is the most universally recognized warrant in the theological activity practiced within American Protestant congregations. See: James Robert Nieman, "Local Theologies in American Protestantism: Proposals Toward a Method for Research" (Ph.D. diss., Emory University, 1997).

[36] Comment attributed to a member of the separatist congregation in Gainsborough. See W. T. Whitley, *A History of British Baptists* (London: C. Griffin and Co., 1923), 20.

[37] Theology in the service of faithful Christian discipleship is a classic theme of Anabaptist and Baptist theology. See John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1972) and James Wm. McClendon, Jr., *Ethics*: *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, 2d ed. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002).

human life with the help of the Holy Spirit, Christians grow in their knowledge of God and what it means to live as followers of Jesus Christ.

Third, theological proficiency requires a double listening to the story of Jesus Christ and our stories. The shifting sands of culture constantly create novel conditions for the church to inhabit; it must ever relate the Gospel to new surroundings.

Christian identity is constantly being negotiated and renegotiated:

> To be theologically proficient is to become *critically attentive* to the world. To become theologically proficient is to start taking critical notice of the ideas and patterns of thought that make the world go round. . . . It is vital to learn all you can about the Christian story, and the ways in which Christian teachings have been explored and examined over the years, but it is just as vital to read a newspaper, to read novels, to be interested in current affairs, to begin learning to read the whole world around you as carefully as you can. Real proficiency in Christian theology will only emerge as that careful reading of the world and the exploration of the Christian gospel meet and interact with each other.[38]

The theological imagination is formed in the context of a dialogue between the Christian story and human stories personal and corporate. Theological proficiency demands attentiveness to the Christian story and our human stories in the context of the empirical reality of the world where the Christian faith must be lived out. Much academic theology, historic and contemporary, attempts to map and traverse the contours of society. At the same time academic theology eschews listening to the stories of congregations and ordinary Christians. Yet, these are the very stories that ministers of the Gospel, trained by academic theologians, are going to hear and participate in at the cutting edge of congregational life. Pastors are the

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[38] Mike Higton, *Christian Doctrine*, 25. Italics are original to the source.

theologically literate Christians most likely to encounter the stories of congregations and individuals. These are the stories they will meet by virtue of their vocation to lead churches in mission and ministry. How are pastors to respond to the stories of congregations and individual Christian lives? The answer to this question supplies the fourth factor that justifies paying careful attention to the story of Jesus Christ and our stories.

Pastoral integrity and competence require those called to lead congregations and enable ordinary believers to mature in Christian discipleship listen to the congregation(s) and the people they are responsible for. Understanding the people one is charged to care for is a prerequisite for relating the Gospel to them. The same principle applies to making the Gospel known to those uncommitted yet curious about Christianity. Jeff Astley and Ann Christie, reflecting on research into the beliefs of lay Anglicans in England, argue that theologians ought to pay attention to the "ordinary" theologies of Christians in the pews.[39] Ordinary theology is the theological thinking and beliefs of those who have never undertaken formal academic training in theology. In *Taking Ordinary Theology Seriously*, Astley relates the story of Barbara, a lay Anglican woman in her fifties, who had been going to church sporadically for most of her life. She observed, while speaking about the clergy she had known, "*You know, religion is really for the clergy; they just let us have a lend of*

[39] Jeff Astley, *Ordinary Theology: Looking, Listening and Learning in Theology* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002); Jeff Astley and Ann Christie, *Taking Ordinary Theology Seriously* (Cambridge: Grove Books Limited, 2007).

it."[40] "God-talk" was presumed to be the preserve of priests and ministers. The issues that stirred controversy in the church perplexed Barbara. "For her other things mattered far more: kindness and loving care; telling the truth and behaving justly; creating and sustaining good relationships with other people; and quietly seeking the presence of God – rather than loudly haranguing him or over-confidently speaking for him."[41] She seemed disappointed so few of the issues that were troubling to her were touched upon in sermons. Doubts about some aspects of Christian faith surfaced in her mind and she wondered if such thoughts were "normal". "*You sit in the pew wondering if everyone else has 'got it' and you are the odd one out*."[42] Barbara eventually realized that she was not alone in entertaining such thoughts and observed very few members of the congregation were ever asked what they were thinking. The reason for this state of affairs she deduced was because their beliefs were regarded as "*just ordinary*". The beliefs of ordinary people did not matter. In listening to Barbara and others like her Jeff Astley and Ann Christie encountered these feelings and perspectives repeatedly. They conclude,

> If the church is to grow, or even survive, in its third millennium it needs something more than a certain freshness of expression. It needs to do some serious listening to its own members (and former members, and potential members). It needs to take them *seriously*, by taking what they believe seriously. It needs to listen to their theology.[43]

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[40] Astley and Christie, *Taking Ordinary*, 3. Italics are original to the source.

[41] Ibid., 4.

[42] Ibid.

[43] Ibid.

Astley and Christie are correct that those who communicate the Christian message, offer pastoral care, and lead congregations in worship and mission, irrespective of which side of the Atlantic Ocean they live on, need to listen to Barbara and Christians like her. "Ordinary theology is the theology to which every Christian pastor, preacher, and teacher must relate. We need to know about the beliefs and values of those for whom we care and those who are forced to listen to *u*s, and get some sort of handle on their patterns and modes of thinking, believing and valuing."[44] Listening to ordinary Christians is the only way to acquire an authentic understanding of what they actually believe:

> We must listen to what people say *as theology*; for the often halting, poorly-expressed, non-technical and unsystematic reflections on their faith of most churchgoers do represent a kind of theology. But it will only be heard by ears that are attuned to it.[45]

Although not always clearly articulated ordinary theology is significant. Ordinary theology represents the expression and interpretation of faith in the everyday life of a believer. "And that faith is important to people because it is practiced."[46] Ordinary theology or everyday theology, the term preferred in this project, functions as a compass to guide life and supplies resources to address the complex and ambiguous reality of being human.

Academic theology is the endeavor of a small elite. Ordinary theology is the theology practiced by the overwhelming majority of Christians and merits careful

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[44] Astley and Christie, *Taking Ordinary*, 5.

[45] Ibid., 6.

[46] Ibid.

attention. "Statistically speaking … ordinary theology *is* the theology of the church."[47] If academic theology is to engage with the theologies embodied in congregational practices and in everyday religion, then it must acquire skills necessary to observe and listen to congregations and individual Christians.

Academic theologians need also to be able to equip the ministers they train to discern congregational theology and everyday theology. The story of Jesus Christ, when it interacts with our human stories, is significant in two ways. First, the potential exists for encounter with God. Second, theological reflection on God, Jesus Christ, and the Christian life is precipitated. How are the story of Jesus Christ and our stories to be heard and what method of theological reflection will enable dialogue between varieties of lived theology and academic theology?

Method

The two central tasks of this dissertation, identifying beliefs about Jesus Christ present in congregational practices and everyday lives, and placing these beliefs in dialogue with a systematic theological account of Jesus Christ demand the study of empirical reality and theological reflection. The intertwining of these activities situates this project in the realm of practical theology, which is the branch of theology that studies human experience and empirical reality in church and society from a theological perspective. The field of practical theology is characterized by a multitude of definitions and methodological approaches. For the purposes of this dissertation, practical theology is defined as critical theological inquiry into the

[47] Astley and Christie, *Taking Ordinary*, 6.

contemporary church and its engagement with culture to ensure and enable faithfulness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ in the church's life and witness. A summary of the remaining chapters in this dissertation presents an overview of the practical theological method adopted to facilitate a dialogue between different kinds of theological discourse and generate critical and constructive insights to be of service to the church.

Chapter Two reviews the literature relating to the visible church, everyday religion, and Christian doctrine with reference to the disciplines of practical theology, sociology of religion, and systematic theology. The categories of culture, narrative, and identity supply important theoretical perspectives to make sense of the empirical data gathered from congregations and relate research findings to the Gospel story. Although the visible church, everyday religion, and Christian doctrine interact in the experience of Christians, it is usual to study them in isolation from one another. Recent developments in the academy mean that the category of culture is increasingly shared across the disciplines of practical theology, sociology of religion, and systematic theology. These three disciplines show signs of cross-fertilization, as a consequence of a growing common interest in culture as a category of explanation. The turn to culture has redirected scholarly efforts across academic disciplines to study community, narrative, practice and belief in the empirical reality of human life and the ways in which they overlap and intersect in human experience. Creative opportunities are emerging as a consequence of the shared focus on culture for inter-

disciplinary dialogue to generate critical and creative insights instructive for the church.

Chapter Three is an overview of James McClendon's theology, which is explicated in the context of his life experience, career as a seminary professor, and development as a theologian. The key themes of McClendon's theological project are summarized, his theological method examined in relation to the practical theological method employed in "Living with Jesus", and a rationale offered for using McClendon as the academic theology in dialogue with the lived theologies identified in the case studies. The chapter concludes with a consideration of McClendon's christology.

Chapter Four narrates the history, denominational affiliation, social context, and contemporary identities of First Baptist Church in Jamaica Plain and Ruggles Baptist Church. These churches are heirs to substantial histories and can look back on rich heritages. The chapter shows that the congregations have very different relationships to their respective histories. Numerical decline and loss of institutional vitality afflicted both congregations in the closing decades of the twentieth century. The chapter describes the elements at play in the formation of congregational identities in Ruggles Baptist Church and First Baptist Church in Jamaica Plain. Both churches exhibit a thirst for spiritual renewal and find themselves confronted by challenging, albeit different, urban social contexts in Boston. These congregations struggle with the houses of worship they have inherited from the past. The buildings available to the churches strain congregational resources and often appear to be more

of a hindrance than a help to worship and witness in the contemporary world. Charting new courses into the twenty-first century is no easy venture.

The next two chapters describe and seek to make sense of the understandings of Jesus Christ at work in the human experience of lived religion. Chapter Five portrays and interprets the place of Jesus Christ in the patterns of worship and mission practiced by the participant congregations. The overall shape and the constitutive elements of Sunday morning worship are analyzed to determine the operative christology embodied in the corporate worship of First Baptist Church in Jamaica Plain and Ruggles Baptist Church. Chapter Five also examines the varieties of missionary presence characteristic of the participant churches. Consideration is given to the ways in which the congregations witness to Christ in corporate practices. The understanding, practice, and priorities of mission overlap between the churches, but also reflect significant differences.

Chapter Six explores the understanding of Jesus Christ operative in the lives of ordinary believers that belong to First Baptist Church in Jamaica Plain and Ruggles Baptist Church. Specifically, the chapter pays attention to how ordinary believers perceive the core of Jesus' message, interpret the cross, view the resurrection, and make sense of his identity. The research date suggests that three types of christology are operative across the two congregations and in the individual lives of ordinary believers. The chapter concludes with an examination of how individual believers embody everyday christologies in practices of faith.

Chapter Seven rehearses the main findings generated by the data reported in the two preceding chapters and places them in dialogue with the christology of James McClendon. Critical and creative insights are sought and a number of practical theological questions are proposed to the participant churches.

Methodological Note

The theological method worked out in "Living with Jesus" can be conceptualized as four elements or moments. First, attention is focused on stories and practices in the visible church or everyday religion. Listening to people and observing practices are vital skills in discerning the shape of the visible church and everyday religion. Second, the beliefs embodied in stories and practices are distilled and expressed in conceptual categories. A movement from story and practice to belief, expressed as an abstract concept, involves selection, interpretation, and an invoking of imagination. Third, the stories, practices, and beliefs arising from the case studies interact with literature in the fields of theology and sociology, particularly the christology of James McClendon. Fourth, critical and creative insights issuing from the various dialogues central to this project are identified to stimulate theological reflection in the participant congregations and the wider audiences to which this project is directed. In practice it is difficult to isolate these four elements as four distinct moments of critical reflection. All four elements were constantly interacting in my thought processes as the researcher.

Intended Audience

Three audiences are addressed by this study: the participant congregations, pastors and seminarians, and the academy, particularly sociologists of religion, practical theologians, and systematic theologians.

The congregations that participated in the project constitute the first audience to potentially gain from the project. Hopefully, First Baptist Church in Jamaica Plain and Ruggles Baptist Church recognize themselves in the textual portraits presented within the pages of the project. Sometimes, simply reading one's own story and standing back to behold a portrait of oneself is a stimulus in its own right to fresh insights and a spur to new ways of doing things, even before any suggestions are proffered from another source. The questions proposed as part of the project are offered with the hope that they may be of assistance to the life and witness of the churches that so graciously agreed to take part in the study. The potential is also present for congregations other than those that were studied to detect reflections and echoes of themselves in the descriptions and interpretations of First Baptist Church in Jamaica Plain and Ruggles Baptist Church, and so precipitate critical and creative thinking useful to congregational life and witness elsewhere.

Seminarians and pastors, those who are preparing to lead congregations in worship and mission, and those already at work in these important tasks, make up the second audience for whom this project is relevant. The kind of methodical approach to studying congregations that must be pursued in an academic research project is not something that can easily be replicated by a seminarian on placement with a

congregation or by a busy working pastor immersed in church life. But it is hoped that "Living with Jesus" encourages seminarians and pastors to adopt an attitude of attentiveness to congregations and individual Christians that will enable them to listen out for lived theology and relate it to the academic theology grounded in Christian doctrine that is such a valuable resource for the Christian life.

The third audience is the Academy, especially sociologists of religion, practical theologians, and systematic theologians. Sociologists of religion stand to gain a broader perspective on the lived religion of Baptist Christians in the United States. The project contributes to a steadily growing body of literature seeking to unearth and understand the place of religion in the everyday lives of ordinary people. As an exercise in practical theology, this project engages with specific examples of congregational theology and everyday theology to make available a critical and creative resource to congregations and individual Christians, which aims to enable and ensure faithfulness to Jesus Christ in the life of Christian discipleship. Theorizing about beliefs and practices central to the Christian life is insufficient. Practical theology is required to engage with the empirical reality of faith in congregations and individual lives. Finally, the resources of systematic theology are deployed in a practical theological method to inform theologies embodied in everyday religion and the visible church. Systematic theology need no longer remain detached from the visible church and everyday religion. Indeed, this project challenges systematic theology to take congregational and everyday practice of faith more seriously than has previously been the case. Systematic theologians must not be content to wait for

sociologists of religion and practical theologians to supply material to work with; it is incumbent upon systematic theologians to ask what they can do to usefully direct the resources of Christian doctrine into the life and witness of the visible church and the everyday lives of Christians.

Location of the Researcher

The identity of the researcher is that of an English Baptist minister who relocated to Boston, America, temporarily, for five and a half years to pursue postgraduate studies for the purpose of more effectively addressing questions that originally surfaced in his native environment. I discovered that the curiosity aroused in me on the English side of the Atlantic Ocean was equally stimulated on the Eastern Seaboard of the United States. The place of Jesus Christ in the life and witness of congregations, and in the everyday lives of believers, is as diverse and enigmatic within the United States as anything I have experienced in the United Kingdom. During the course of my sojourn in Boston I glimpsed a small fraction of Baptist life and witness in the United States. I settled among those Baptists affiliated with the American Baptist Churches USA, the Baptist denomination in the United States that bears the closest resemblance in terms of ethos, theological outlook, polity, variety of denominational backgrounds represented among members, and ethnic diversity to my natural habitat in the Baptist Union of Great Britain. The peculiarities of American culture, historical, social, and religious, framed the context in which the Baptist congregations depicted in this study worked out their faith in Jesus Christ. My experience of urban ministry in London and my Baptist identity inclined me to a

sympathetic outlook on the congregations I studied. A sense of kinship marked my experience amongst the two congregations I spent the best part of a year getting to know. All the fieldwork necessary for this project was completed before I returned to England in the summer of 2007. The writing up of this dissertation has been undertaken in London, England, amidst the multiple demands of pastoral ministry in an urban context, where I am striving to relate the story of Jesus Christ to the stories of a congregation and the people who belong to it.

CHAPTER TWO

THE VISIBLE CHURCH, EVERYDAY RELIGION, AND CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE

At the front of the church, religion is much concerned with correctness of doctrine, morality, authority, procedure. Back in the vestibule, religion is much more about the experience of transforming power in any available form.[1]

Overview

The priorities of pastors do not always coincide with the passions and concerns of the people they are charged to lead. Put in slightly different terms, everyday religion does not necessarily correspond to the beliefs and practices of the visible church, and can be far removed from the carefully thought out content of Christian doctrine. This state of affairs is echoed in the world of academia. The sociology of religion, which studies the human dynamics of faith in the visible church and everyday religion, and theology, which is committed to explicating the development of Christian doctrine through the ages (historical theology) and articulating Christian belief in coherent and consistent terms in the contemporary world (systematic theology), rarely engage with one another. Consequently, the different types of theological discourse embedded in the human dynamics of daily life (everyday religion), congregational practices (the visible church), and the work of a professional theologian (Christian doctrine as it is articulated and

[1] Luke Timothy Johnson, *Religious Experience in Earliest Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 1-2.

practiced in seminaries and university divinity schools) do not typically interact with each other. "Living with Jesus" aims to place these theological discourses in conversation with one another by distilling the theologies present in the lived religion of two congregations and engaging with a particular academic theology, the work of James McClendon.

The inquiry at the heart of this dissertation builds on and extends three important streams in theological research, which are considered in the literature review that follows. Section one examines the sociological and theological significance of the visible church (a component of lived religion) with reference to American society and biblical foundations. The evidence demonstrates that congregations occupy an important place in the social fabric of the United States and so merit careful study to arrive at an accurate and nuanced understanding of contemporary society in the United States. Simultaneously, congregations possess a theological meaning illustrated by the Apostle Paul's description of the church as the "Body of Christ", which points to the church as an embodiment of the Gospel. Whatever theological self-understanding a Christian community of faith confesses, it cannot escape the fact that its life and witness assume a particular cultural form.[2] Hence, the empirical reality of the church as an embodied social entity demands the careful attention of the theologian and church member precisely because it is through this material medium that the church lives out the Gospel and points beyond itself to God, the creator and redeemer of humankind, who is made known in Jesus Christ.

[2] Helen Cameron, *Resourcing Mission: Practical Theology for Changing Churches* (London: SCM Press, 2010), 1-41.

Mapping the cultural form of a congregation is a necessary exercise to comprehend the actual reality of the church, relate it meaningfully to theological models of the church, and to enable the church's mission and ministry to engage with the wider culture.

Section two outlines three theoretical perspectives that inform the empirical research reported in "Living with Jesus". First, this dissertation assumes that the epistemological differences between sociology and theology do not rule out the possibility of a constructive dialogue between these disciplines about lived religion. Sociology can make a useful contribution to the theological imagination. Not all sociologists and theologians concur with this claim. A selective review of prominent voices in the debate on the relation of sociology and theology sets out the key issues. This dissertation contends that sociology provides tools for theologians to identify the content of lived theologies and social theory to make sense of the human dynamics of faith. Sociological insights can prompt theologians to ask questions without providing theological answers. Second, sociologists and theologians are both beginning to recognize the importance of studying lived religion in the form of the visible church and everyday religion. Different reasons account for this convergence of interest. However, one factor common to sociology and theology at present is the importance attached to culture as an explanatory category that helps in making sense of human existence. "Living with Jesus" presupposes a dynamic and open concept of culture and welcomes the turn to culture as a positive development within the disciplines of sociology and theology. Third. "Living with Jesus" is a study in

identity formation in individual believers and the corporate life and witness of congregations. The category of "narrative" functions as a means of conceptualizing the formation of identity in the lives of individuals and groups. To conceive of identity in terms of the stories we tell about ourselves as individuals, the groups we participate in, and the large-scale stories that help us make sense of life recognizes the dynamic and multilayered complexity of human lives. Ultimately, "Living with Jesus" is about understanding the place of the Gospel story in the lives of individual Christians and the worshipping and witnessing communities of faith to which they belong. In summary, section two of the literature review sets out the theoretical framework that informs the empirical research and theological reflection at the heart of "Living with Jesus": sociology can inform the theological imagination, culture functions as a category that bridges the disciplines of sociology and theology, and the concept of narrative illuminates the formation of identities in both individuals and congregations.

The third section of the literature review summarizes the state of contemporary scholarship on the visible church, everyday religion, and Christian doctrine with reference to christology. A few voices in systematic theology are calling for the discipline, especially in the area of ecclesiology (doctrine of the church), to make space for empirical study of the church as a social entity. This agenda remains largely unrealized. Practical theology, although concerned with the condition of the contemporary church in the United States, shows little interest in unearthing everyday and congregational theologies. Some proponents of practical

theology are theorizing about practices to enhance the quality of Christian life and witness, but pay little attention to actual practices. The fact is that contemporary scholarship in sociology and theology is only just beginning to open up the unexplored contours of everyday theologies and possesses scanty knowledge of how Jesus Christ is perceived in the lives of ordinary believers and the worship and mission of congregations.

(1) The Sociological and Theological Significance of the Visible Church

In sociological terms, the congregation is the normative cultural form of corporate religious life in the United States.[3] Congregations are widely dispersed throughout American society.[4] They are an important source of social capital in America, producing much of the "glue" that binds society together: relationships between individuals, social networks, and trust.[5] Congregations enable people to develop civic skills, including the abilities to lead groups, organize meetings, and

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[3] R. Stephen Warner, "The Place of the Congregation in the Contemporary American Religious Configuration," in *American Congregations*, vol. 2, *New Perspectives in the Study of Congregations*, ed. James Wind and James W. Lewis, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 54-99.

[4] Estimates of the number of congregations in the United States vary from 300,000 to 350,000. Carl S. Dudley and David A. Roozen, *Faith Communities Today: A Report on Religion in the United States Today* (Hartford, CT: The Hartford Institute for Religion Research, 2001), 3. Hadaway and Marler estimate the presence of 331,000 churches and other houses of worship in the United States based on a careful analysis of available data. See C. Kirk Hadaway and Penny Long Marler, "How Many Americans Attend Worship Each Week? An Alternative Approach to Measurement," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 44, no. 3 (2005): 307-322.

[5] Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000).

speaking in public.[6] Congregations introduce many Americans to the arts, especially in the context of public worship, by offering a wide range of opportunities to participate in and experience music (most common), drama, painting, and sculpture.[7] Increasingly, congregations are providing social services to their communities.[8]

The contribution congregations make to social and civic wellbeing in American society does not exhaust their significance. Christianity from its inception has affirmed the theological dimension of congregations. Nowhere is this clearer than in the pastoral writings of the Apostle Paul in the New Testament. Paul makes a bold claim about his own life and those who work in partnership with him for the sake of the Gospel, "But we have this treasure in clay jars so that it may be clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us" (2 Corinthians 4:7). The context of Paul's remarks relate to the power of God at work in his mortal body. To Paul's way of thinking, the power of God transcends his human weakness, a claim that the Apostle makes for all who encounter God in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The Gospel is the power of God that brings salvation into human experience (Romans 1:16). Paul reminds the Christians at Corinth (1 Corinthians 1:26-31) that God is pleased to work through people just like them, those deemed unimportant and weak

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[6] Kenneth D. Wald, Dennis E. Owens, and Samuel S. Hill, "Churches as Political Communities," *American Political Science Review* 82, no. 2 (1988): 531-548.

[7] Mark Chaves, *Congregations in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 166-201.

[8] Nancy Tatom Ammerman, *Pillars of Faith: American Congregations and Their Partners* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005); Mark Chaves, *Congregations in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 45-93; Arthur E. Farnsley, II, *Rising Expectations: Urban Congregations, Welfare Reform, and Civic Life* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003).

by human standards. Jackson Carroll in his wide-ranging study of clergy and their role in church life, *God's Potters: Pastoral Leadership and the Shaping of Congregations*,[9] is, therefore, justified in concluding that Paul has in mind not simply himself, and those people travelling with him to spread the Gospel in the ancient world, but also the Christians he cares for who are gathered in local congregations. Carroll has good warrant for extrapolating Paul's image of "clay jars" and applying it to congregations. Congregations, as much as individuals are "clay jars" or material reality, through which the power of God may be encountered in human life. As Carroll observes, "This is a startling claim! Paul is saying that in their congregational life – in their beliefs, practices, relationships, and the witness of their daily lives – God is revealed."[10] God is present and active in the tangible life and witness of a congregation. The visible church is the human social reality where God is most likely to be revealed and experienced:

> Put differently, Christians understand congregations to be a primary mode – arguably *the* primary mode – through which the Christian gospel is organizationally embodied and made visible. They are settings in which people encounter the meaning of the gospel in word and sacrament, grow in their understanding and commitment to it, experience the community and support of fellow believers, and are empowered to participate in the church's ministry and mission.[11]

Paul, in his first letter to the church at Corinth, also describes the congregation in that city as "the body of Christ" (I Corinthians. 12:27). "This is an equally

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[9] Jackson W. Carroll, *God's Potters: Pastoral Leadership and the Shaping of Congregations* (Grand Rapids. MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2006).

[10] Ibid., 1.

[11] Ibid., 11.

extraordinary claim that in the common life and witness of these quite ordinary and often wayward Christians at Corinth, Christ was present."[12] James Dunn, a British New Testament scholar, explains that the term "body" in Paul's thinking refers to an "embodiment, enabling corporeal encounter and relationship."[13] Behind Paul's metaphor for the church is the idea that human beings relate to one another through their embodied existence. Hence, it is human embodiment that makes society possible. Paul's description of the church as the "body of Christ" makes the point that "As it is human embodiment which makes society possible, so the church is the means by which Christ makes actual tangible encounter with wider society."[14] The crucified and risen Christ is present in the concrete human social reality of a congregation of his disciples. He manifests himself and is knowable through the corporate life and witness of a congregation. To speak of the church as the "body of Christ" is to allude to "the visibility, the apprehensibility, of Christ."[15]

Since the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1-47) the Holy Spirit has been making the risen Jesus present to the experience of his disciples and convicting people of the truth of the Gospel. Paul himself encountered the risen Jesus on the road to Damascus

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[12] Carroll, *God's Potters*, 11. The "body of Christ" is a contested concept. Some scholars view the "body of Christ" merely as a metaphor to describe unity in diversity within the church, and play down the notion that "the body of Christ" points to the risen Christ encountering wider society through the church. For example: R.Y.K. Fung, "Body of Christ," in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, ed., Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, and Daniel G. Reid (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1993), 71-82.

[13] James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1998), 563.

[14] Ibid. See also 55-61 for Dunn's exposition of Paul's use of the Greek word *soma* ("body").

[15] Paul S. Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces: Baptist Identity in Church and Theology* (Carlisle, Cumbria: Paternoster Press, 2003), 207.

(Acts 9:1-9). The Holy Spirit is God's empowering presence[16] or "God on the inside"[17] of human life, indwelling Christian believers and making the presence of the risen Jesus an ongoing reality in the experience of the church as a social entity.[18] Hence, Paul's declaration that the church in Corinth is the "body of Christ" applies to congregations in his era and our own generation. Jesus Christ is present in the life and witness of Christian congregations today in Boston, London, or any other location by virtue of the person and work of the Holy Spirit.

It is, therefore, evident that sociology and theology present very different insights into the significance of congregations. These differences in sociological and theological perspectives on the visible church stem in great measure from the way of knowing (epistemology) each discipline traditionally appeals to. Sociology draws its data from empirical descriptions of social reality. Theology's primary description of the church stems from a claim to revelation (the self-unveiling of the person and purposes of God) that is witnessed to in Scripture. How do theological and sociological perspectives on the visible church relate to one another? Can a sociological approach inform a theological vision of the "clay jars" the Apostle Paul claims mediate the power of God? Is a sociological perspective on lived religion capable of saying anything to a theological vision of the Christian life? Any attempt

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[16] Gordon D. Fee, *Paul, the Spirit, and the People of God* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Pubishers, 1996).

[17] Nigel G. Wright, *God on the Inside: The Holy Spirit in Scripture* (Oxford: Bible Reading Fellowship, 2006).

[18] Stanley J. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1994), 482-485.

to answer these questions must begin by examining the nature and limitations of the epistemologies associated with sociology and theology respectively to clarify the grounds on which any potential partnership rests.

(2) Theoretical Perspectives

(i) Sociology Informs the Theological Imagination

Different Epistemologies

Sociology seeks to explain what happens in society on the basis of evidence derived from the observable (empirical) world.[19] A sociologist takes a fresh look at familiar surroundings and attempts to make sense of them. "Sociological problems can occur at the individual, community, social, or global levels."[20] The sociologist does not employ transcendent categories and normative values, preferring rational modes of thought that emphasize "Critical, interpretative, quantitative and theoretical skills."[21] Sociology, therefore, constructs a particular kind of imagination (a way of describing and making sense of the world). A key feature of contemporary sociology is the practice of reflexivity by which a sociologist identifies her identity and the factors operative in forming it, including nationality, ethnicity, education, beliefs, age, and class background. Reflexivity is a process of rigorous self-critical analysis. Thus

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[19] Evan Willis, *The Sociological Quest: An Introduction to the Study of Social Life* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1996), 9-29.

[20] Ibid., 10.

[21] Richard H. Roberts, *Religion, Theology and the Human Sciences* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 191.

a sociologist seeks to understand the society she inhabits, identify her place within it, and recognize the interpretative lenses through which she makes sense of society.

From a sociological perspective, the visible church and everyday religion are social realities subject to contingent factors, which can be observed and interpreted without recourse to normative and transcendent categories like sin (human rebellion towards God), grace (the undeserved but freely given goodness of God), and the Holy Spirit (the third person of the Godhead). Sociology can identify what Christians believe, what they do, and the social dynamics at work within different aspects of human existence, but it cannot determine the validity of theological beliefs, religious motivations, or spiritual practices. For example, a sociologist or anthropologist, on the basis of empirical inquiry, may only investigate people's ideas about sin. A theologian affirms the reality of sin and explicates its nature on the basis of revelation. Sociologists can study the church as an institution with the characteristics of an organization,[22] but they cannot determine whether or not the church is the product of a divine initiative as theologians claim.

Theology means "talk about God".[23] Yet, talk about God is possible only if there is some basis for knowledge of God. Human beings are incapable of determining the character, purpose, and nature of God by their own efforts, because God is transcendent. Christianity confesses that God has freely chosen to encounter human beings and disclosed Godself in terms that are intelligible to us. Therefore,

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[22] Margaret Harris, *Organizing God's Work: Challenges for Churches and Synagogues* (Houndmills, Basingstoke: MacMillan Press, 1998), 19-21.

[23] For an examination of the nature of theology see Chapter One, pages 15-28.

Christian theology depends upon a claim to revelation or self-disclosure of God. God makes known to human beings what is otherwise unknowable (God's character, purposes, and nature). The Biblical story witnesses to God's revelation. Being attentive to the biblical story is for the purpose of meeting with God and discerning how to live before God. A Christian congregation communicates God's story through its life and witness and so enables God's story to interact with our human stories. Hence, the Christian experience of finding faith in God through Jesus Christ is a consequence of the biblical story intersecting with human stories.

The category of story or narrative provides a bridge on which sociology and theology can meet. Sociology pays attention to personal and public human stories: it produces textual representations of the observed empirical reality it seeks to describe and understand. Theology is oriented to the biblical story that emerged as a response to divine self-revelation and seeks to relate the biblical story to contemporary human stories in personal and public dimensions.

Although sociology and theology operate with different epistemologies both increasingly share a mutual interest in lived religion, but approach lived religion from different perspectives, on the basis of different assumptions, and ask different questions. Lived religion in its broadest terms consists of beliefs, practices, and experiences, which give expression to human yearnings for the divine or transcendent in life. In practice, lived religion assumes many different guises within individual lives and human society. For the purpose of "Living with Jesus", lived religion is explored from a Christian perspective in the context of the United States and consists

of the visible church and everyday religion. A cursory review of trends in the disciplines of sociology and theology illustrates how interest in lived religion has oscillated between active engagement and profound disinterest.

Lived Religion in Sociology and Theology

In the early stages of the development of sociology in the United States the discipline was enthusiastically endorsed and practiced by theologians committed to the Social Gospel.[24] Advocates of the Social Gospel believed that the kingdom of God demanded the transformation of conditions in society that are inherently unjust and inhibit human flourishing. They appropriated sociology to describe and analyze religion and the social conditions of human life. Sociology was viewed as a tool to help engineer a better society rather than as means of objectively making sense of society.[25] Secular sociologists were not impressed by the work of Social Gospel practitioners of the discipline. A combination of the demise of the Social Gospel with a corresponding diminishing of interest in sociology among the mainline denominations and reluctance in professional scholarly journals to publish articles by sociologists with religious commitments resulted in a dramatic reduction in

[24] J. Graham Morgan, "The Development of Sociology and the Social Gospel," *Sociological Analysis* 30, no. 1 (1969): 42-53; Myer S. Reed, "An Alliance for Progress: The Early Years of the Sociology of Religion in the United States," *Sociological Analysis* 42, no. 1 (1981): 27-46.

[25] Reed, "An Alliance for Progress," 42-43.

sociological writing on the place of religion in the United States. Secular sociologists did not compensate for this gap in scholarly research.[26]

This lack of interest in the study of religion within the ranks of professional sociologists in the United States is explained by the grip secularization theory held over the discipline of sociology for much of the twentieth century.[27] The secularization thesis or secularization theory, which originated in Europe, has been proposed in many different forms.[28] In essence, secularization theory predicts the gradual withering of religion to a marginal factor in human society as a consequence of modernity (a complex mix of powerful social forces that includes industrialization, differentiation,[29] a rational scientific world view that excludes God, and urbanization) encroaching more and more upon human life. Secularization theory functioned as a "blinder" that prevented many sociologists "seeing" the empirical evidence for religion in the societies they studied and sought to understand. The empirical fact that religion persists and in many cases actually thrives challenges secularization theory

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[26] Myer S. Reed, "After the Alliance: The Sociology of Religion in the United States from 1925 to 1949," *Sociological Analysis* 43, no. 3 (1982): 189-204.

[27] Nancy T. Ammerman, "Christian Scholarship in Sociology: Twentieth Century Trends," *Christian Scholar's Review* 29, no. 4 (2000): 685-694.

[28] James A. Beckford, *Social Theory and Religion* (Cambridge; Cambridge University Press, 2003), 30-72.

[29] Differentiation is the tendency in modern human societies to separate the various elements of human life, such as home, work, education, and religion, into clearly demarcated locations and spheres of activity.

and necessitates a re-evaluation of social theory and research priorities.[30] Consequently, over the last three decades, sociologists of religion have paid a great deal of attention to lived religion in the form of the visible church (congregations and denominations) to assess the place of religion in American society. More recently, sociologists of religion have come to recognize that lived religion in its multiple and varied everyday forms cannot be ignored and merits careful study.[31] To study lived religion, which is a central dimension in the everyday lives of many people, is to better understand who we are as human beings.

Theologians, particularly systematic theologians working in the field of ecclesiology (doctrine of the church)[32] and practical theologians seeking to be of service to the church, also increasingly acknowledge the importance of studying the visible church and to a lesser extent everyday religion.[33] They offer a timely challenge to the academy to be of service to the church, to ask how theological

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[30] R. Stephen Warner, "Work in Progress: Toward a New Paradigm in the Sociological Study of Religion in the United States," in *A Church of Our Own: Disestablishment and Diversity in American Religion* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 18-62.

[31] Nancy T. Ammerman, ed., *Everyday Religion: Observing Modern Religious Lives* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

[32] William T. Cavanaugh, *Torture and Eucharist: Theology, Politics, and the Body of Christ* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998); Nicholas M. Healy, *Church, World, and the Christian Life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Lewis S. Mudge, *Rethinking the Beloved Community: Ecclesiology, Hermeneutics, Social Theory* (Geneva/Lanham: WCC/University Press of America, 2001).

[33] Paul Ballard and John Pritchard, *Practical Theology in Action: Christian Thinking in the Service of Church and Society* (London: SPCK, 1996); Don Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology: Descriptive and Strategic Proposals* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991); Mark J. Cartledge, *Practical Theology: Charismatic and Empirical Perspectives* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2005); Martyn Percy, *Engaging with Contemporary Culture: Christianity, Culture, and the Concrete Church* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005); Johannes A. van der Ven, *Ecclesiology in Context* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996).

research and reflection may assist congregations to follow Christ more faithfully. Mark Cartledge, a practical theologian maintains that practical theology is intended to help the church in a renewal of right belief, right action, and right attitude.[34] Nicholas Healy, who writes in the fields of historical and systematic theology, contends that the function of ecclesiology is to assist the church in fulfilling its tasks of enabling Christians to witness to Christ and be his disciples.[35] Martin Stringer, a scholar in the fields of anthropology and sociology, suggests that "Congregational studies is … part of a process, an alliance between the church and the academy, a mutual search for a better way of being church and living out the Christian life … in the world today."[36] All three authors concur that the empirical reality of the visible church can be illuminated by social theory[37] and theology to generate insights to help Christians live more faithfully as followers of Christ in the contemporary world.

Sociologists and theologians today are, therefore, both expressing an interest in studying lived religion (the visible church and everyday religion). Are sociology and theology capable of a constructive working partnership or embroiled in irreconcilable conflict? A variety of opinions characterize the response of sociologists and theologians to this pressing question.

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[34] Cartledge, *Practical Theology*, 17-31.

[35] Healy, *Church, World and the Christian Life*, 1-24.

[36] Martin Stringer, "Putting Congregational Studies to Work: Ethnography, Consultancy and Change," in *Congregational Studies in the UK: Christianity in a Post-Christian Context*, ed. Martin Guest, Karin Trusting, and Linda Woodhead (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), 214.

[37] Healy argues for a theological sociology, but is vague about what this actually means in practice. See Healy, *Church, World and the Christian Life*, 164-169.

Sociology and Theology: Alliance or Conflict?[38]

Peter Berger, one of the most prominent and respected voices in the sociology of religion for several decades, evaluates sociological and theological perspectives in an appendix at the end of *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion*.[39] He situates them in separate compartments. Sociology is empirical and value free. Berger thinks that objectivity is possible for the sociologist, who puts values and beliefs into brackets.[40] The sociologist is obliged to practice a "methodological atheism"[41] but cannot rule out the existence of God.[42] Berger acknowledges that sociology and history tend towards explanations that exclude God from the realities they purport to describe.[43] Theology, on the other hand, is normative and value laden; it allows for the presence and operation of transcendent and supernatural realities in human affairs. According to Berger the conceptual frameworks that inform sociological and theological perspectives are entirely different from one another. He distances himself from any simple notion of

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[38] David Martin, John Orme Mills, and W. S. F. Pickering, ed. *Sociology and Theology: Alliance or Conflict?* (Sussex: Harvester, 1980). The title of this volume captures the two options frequently advocated by participants in the debate about the relationship between sociology and theology.

[39] Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967; reprint, New York: Anchor Books, 1969, 1990), 175-185.

[40] Few contemporary sociologists view their discipline as objective or neutral. The sociologist is situated in a particular time and place, which informs his or her perspectives on what is being studied.

[41] Berger, *Sacred Canopy*, 180.

[42] Ibid.

[43] Ibid., 182-183.

correlation by which contemporary culture raises questions that theology is equipped to answer.[44] Yet, nothing, he claims, in the theory of religion he elaborates is hostile to theology.

Berger concedes some aspects of the sociological perspective may be relevant to the theologian. For example, the theologian makes social-historical assumptions. The sociologist can help the theologian become more aware of his own social location and presuppositions. Sociology, according to Berger, compels the theologian to acknowledge the contingent nature of Christianity, which, like all religions, is a human project and socially constructed:

> Only after the theologian has confronted the historical relativity of religion can he genuinely ask where in this history it may, perhaps, be possible to speak of *discoveries* – discoveries, that is, that transcend the relative character of their infrastructures.[45]

Berger concludes his appendix on theology and sociology in an enigmatic fashion. He suspects that theology may be able to engage with sociology by means of a step-by-step correlation to what can be demonstrated empirically. In the absence of committed partners to such a cause Berger counsels silence. The prospect of a constructive dialogue between theology and sociology remains a possibility, but it is a project beset with problems owing to the very different assumptions that shape each discipline.[46]

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[44] Berger, *Sacred Canopy*, 179.

[45] Ibid., 185.

[46] There is no reason why a sociologist cannot dabble in theology, a pastime that Berger has indulged in repeatedly. See Peter L. Berger, *A Far Glory: The Quest for Faith in an Age of Credulity*

Robin Gill, a British theologian and sociologist of religion, views theology and sociology as complementary disciplines.[47] He suggests that sociology can assist theology in several ways. First, sociology can uncover the social determinants of theological positions. Sociology is capable of examining particular theological positions, but cannot adjudicate the validity of any theological commitment. A theologian and the ideas he or she formulates can be examined sociologically, precisely because he or she is like other thinkers and writers, situated in a specific time and place that can be studied. The theological and non-theological factors at work in the formulation of specific theological positions can be identified. Second, sociology can uncover the social significance of theological positions. Theology has often not paid attention to its social and political impact. For example, it can accentuate trends in church and society that reinforce individualism and privatization. Historically, theology has played a role in fueling anti-Semitism, racism, and denigrating attitudes towards women. Theology has also inspired movements for change and social liberation. Sociology can enable theology to identify how it is impacting society and shaping the life and witness of the church. Third, sociology can uncover the social context of theology. Theology and church are shaped by the specific social conditions they inhabit. Theologians make assumptions about the nature of human society and interactions between people. Sociology can help to test whether or not the social assumptions theologians make are valid.

(New York: The Free Press, 1992); Peter L. Berger, *Questions of Faith: A Skeptical Affirmation of Christianity* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004).

[47] Robin Gill, *The Social Context of Theology* (London: Mowbrays, 1975).

For Gill, it makes sense for theologians to turn to sociologists, the academics who study human interactions in society, for help in making sense of the social context they inhabit and seek to address. Theologians, however, need to be attentive to the theoretical and methodological assumptions made in the sociological data they draw upon to guard against appropriating sociological insights uncritically.

Gill proposes an alternative methodological approach to Berger's "methodological atheism." He thinks the use of the term "atheism" unhelpful and misleading.[48] Gill advocates a methodology that operates "as if" a particular perspective, sociological or theological, is valid.[49] The sociologist views the world "as if" all human interactions are shaped by social factors, while the theologian construes the world "as if" transcendent factors are decisive in determining what happens. Sociology and theology are thus viewed as distinct but complementary disciplines by Gill. This approach allows for contingent social factors and is simultaneously open to the possibility of transcendent determinant factors. Gill, in contrast to Berger, denies that sociology is value free. Any notion of value-free sociology is untenable in the discipline of sociology today. The sociologist is required to be "reflexive" or self-critical, aware of the values operative in her conceptual commitments, which invariably influence the interpretation of data.

Gill's most cogent contribution to the debate on the relation between sociology and theology is to insist upon the importance of theology attending to the

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[48] Gill, *Social Context of Theology*, 31-34.

[49] Ibid., 37-40.

empirical reality of the church. In *Beyond Decline: A Challenge to the Churches,*[50] Robin Gill considers the plight of the church in England in the late 1980s. His analysis of a church struggling against the backdrop of seemingly relentless secularization in English society addresses the gulf that often exists between theory and practice. According to Gill, theology must reckon with the church as it is and not merely paint idealized pictures of what it thinks the church ought to be like:

> Theology also needs to take into account the realities of church life. One of the sharpest functions of sociology is to measure intentions and strategies against attainments and practices…. Churches … have a tendency to romanticize features of their life and to ignore the realities of the finite and sometimes sinful communities which really constitute them.[51]

Gill envisages sociology testing the empirical reality of the church against the stated theological vision of the church. Theology supplies the theological vision to which a church aspires. Sociology provides the means to test whether or not a stated theological vision of the church is being attained. The sociologist can expose gaps, where they exist, between vision and reality. Equally, the sociologist may reveal convergences between vision and reality. Sociology enables theology to take a reality check.

John Milbank, a theologian, by way of contrast, portrays theology and sociology as conflicted. His highly influential *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond*

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[50] Robin Gill, *Beyond Decline: A Challenge to the Churches* (London: SCM Press, 1988).

[51] Ibid., *8-9*.

Secular Reason[52] sets out to break the shackles social theory is perceived to impose upon theology. Milbank argues that Marx and Hegel presume an original ontological violence in their exposition of theories of progress and conflict, a perspective that contradicts the reality of peace central to the Gospel. The secular reason manifested in social theory is built upon assumptions inherently hostile to Christian faith and must, therefore, be rejected if the church is to remain faithful to the Gospel. Milbank assumes that ideas hostile to Christianity exercise a continuing and determinative influence upon social theory in the contemporary world. A significant weakness of *Theology and Social Theory* is that Milbank is not cognizant of (or chooses to ignore) significant developments in the sociology of religion subsequent to Peter Berger's theoretical work on religion in the 1960s. Ontological violence is not written into the DNA of social theory.

The logic of Milbank's argument is that when theologians draw upon social theory they are permitting secular reason to dominate theology. In practice, therefore, social theory has a habit of "policing the sublime,"[53] by which Milbank means that it denies transcendental and spiritual realities so limiting the human imagination. Sociology, in Milbank's view, is inherently reductionist and resorts to explanations that render theological descriptions and interpretations of reality invalid. Sociology becomes a rival theology by its refusal to admit the transcendent and restricts the

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[52] John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990).

[53] Ibid., 106.

scope of Christian imagination (description and interpretation of reality). Milbank calls for a properly theological social theory that is not subject to the constraints of a secular social theory fundamentally opposed to the Gospel. No doubt "policing the sublime" can and does happen, but it is by no means an inevitable outcome of engaging with social theory.

Milbank argues for a kind of idealized church that many critics search for in vain[54] and a sharp church-world distinction that fails to recognize the complex relational webs that connect congregations to the broader cultural contexts they inhabit.[55] Christian Scharen succinctly sums up the limitations of such an approach to ecclesiology:

> Sociologically uninformed dichotomies between the church and the world, because of the simplistic and holistic understanding of culture implied, really harm their own efforts better to lead the church in being the church exactly because their crude cultural lens cannot see exactly the ways in which they are bound up with the world in their very ways of being church. … Therefore, seeing how a church is *both* in *and* of the world helps with the very particular tasks of being a church in *but* not *of* the world.[56]

Milbank has conceded that his idealized account of the church in *Theology and Social Theory* exhibits "rather minimal attempts at 'judicious narrative'"[57] or

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[54] Theo Hobson, "Ecclesiological Fundamentalism," *Modern Believing* 45, no. 4 (2004): 55-57. Robin Gill levels similar criticisms against Milbank. See Robin Gill, *Churchgoing and Christian Ethics*, New Studies in Christian Ethics, no. 15 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 22-25.

[55] Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology*. Guides to Theological Inquiry, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 93-119.

[56] Christian Batalden Scharen, "'Judicious Narratives', or Ethnography as Ecclesiology." *Scottish Journal of Theology* 58, no. 2 (2005): 133.

[57] John Milbank, "A Response," in *Theology and Sociology: A Reader* 2d ed., ed. Robin Gill (London: Cassell, 1996), 464.

description of actual ecclesial communities, a task normally pursued by sociologists of religion and practical theologians. Yet, the basic thesis of *Theology and Social Theory* has proved to be very persuasive among academic theologians. Alister McGrath, for example, voices substantial agreement with Milbank's critique of social theory and subsequently dismisses any notion of serious engagement with the social sciences. He finds more constructive potential for dialogue in the natural sciences.[58]

Milbank employs a history of ideas methodology to unearth the intellectual foundations of sociology and to make his case that sociology is hopelessly at odds with theology. There is no doubt that the origins of sociology as an academic discipline were marked by an absence of Christian intellectual input,[59] but this fact alone does not mean sociology is incapable of making a valuable contribution to theology in the service of the Gospel.[60] Ironically, sociologists of religion today, particularly in the United States, are less likely to postulate secularization as an inevitable outcome of modernity. Indeed, sociology is not so much "policing the sublime" on the basis of a powerful secular narrative as adjusting to the empirical fact that religion continues to shape many individual human lives and movements in society. Thus the study of lived religion in congregations and everyday life is a

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[58] Alister E. McGrath, *A Scientific Theology Volume 1: Nature* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2001), 15-18.

[59] James A. Mathiesen, "The Origins of Sociology: Why No Christian Influence," *Christian Scholar's Review* 19, no. 1 (1989): 49-65.

[60] Robin Gill is not alone in advocating the critical appropriation of sociology into Christian analysis of society and theology. See David Lyons, *Christians and Sociology* (London: Inter-Varsity Press, 1975).

significant component of contemporary sociology of religion.

James McClendon, the academic theologian featured in "Living with Jesus", opens *Ethics*, the first volume of his *Systematic Theology*, with "the humble fact that the church is not the world."[61] At first glance this assertion seems to align McClendon with the sharp distinction between church and world evident in Milbank and the latter's aversion to engaging culture with the tools and theoretical frameworks of sociology, or, perhaps, implies that McClendon advocates some form of retreat by the church into isolation. McClendon, however, makes clear that a journey into cloistered seclusion is out of the question "inasmuch as the line between church and world passes right through each Christian heart."[62] In other words, the church is called to be in the world, but not of the world. Contrary to promoting some kind of withdrawal from the society, McClendon commends mission or making Jesus Christ known to the wider world as a key practice of the church[63] in *Doctrine*, the second volume of *Systematic Theology*, and maps out a theology of culture and a theology of mission in *Witness*[64] the third volume of *Systematic Theology*. He seeks to answer the question: how must the church stand in relation to the culture it inhabits in order to remain faithful to the Gospel? McClendon examines the place of sociology in the

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[61] James Wm. McClendon, Jr., *Ethics: Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, 2d ed. (Nashville: Abingdon Press. 2002), 17.

[62] Ibid.

[63] James Wm. McClendon, Jr., *Doctrine: Systematic Theology*, vol. 2 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 417-452.

[64] James Wm. McClendon, Jr., *Witness: Systematic Theology*, vol. 3 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000),

formation of the theological imagination.[65] He acknowledges that sociology can help establish what the church is actually like in concrete reality even if it cannot function as a substitute for theology. McClendon agrees with Milbank that when social theory and theology discuss religion they "inevitably show up on the same playing field, in position to defeat each other's concrete claims."[66] However, McClendon differs from Milbank in his response to sociology's relation to theology and grants sociology a qualified voice in the formation of the theological imagination; sociologists can offer some help to the theologian. Milbank denies the social sciences any claim to speak in the theologian's ear.

A simple, but significant observation on intellectual pursuits is relevant at this point in the discussion about the relation of theology to sociology. The questions sociologists ask of lived religion are not usually the same as theologians. Harald Hegstad, a practical theologian based in Norway, correctly sums up the situation from a theological perspective:

> It is simply too difficult for the theologian to make use of material that has been constructed out of other interests and research questions. I do not think the main problem is the "presuppositions", but rather the intellectual interests and questions forming the research.[67]

Hegstad is correct that the critical problem is not the different "presuppositions" underlying theology and the social sciences. The kinds of materials

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[65] McClendon, *Witness*, 28-34.

[66] Ibid., 34.

[67] Harald Hegstad, *Ecclesiology and Empirical Study of the Church* (Unpublished Paper): 3, presented at Ecclesiology and Ethnography Consultation, Regent's Park College, University of Oxford 10-12 September, 2008.

theologians require for reflection on everyday theology and congregational theology are not generally available from the data generated by social research because sociologists approach the empirical reality of lived religion with different questions. Such a paucity of suitable material is also a consequence of theologians not studying the visible church and everyday religion, because their attention is directed primarily to biblical, philosophical, and theological resources to understand the nature of the church.

The issue at stake between sociology and theology is not principally whether sociology can tell theology what to do, or whether sociology is descriptive and theology is normative, or that sociology deals in things seen and theology in things unseen. The theological claim that the church is the body of Christ seems to imply that an empirical (observable) social entity provides a window on the transcendent reality of God's presence in the world and acknowledges the reality of divine and human agency in the midst of human life. Theology and sociology simply offer complementary perspectives on the same reality. The resources of both disciplines are available to a practical theologian. He or she is able to use sociological tools of observation (ethnographic study) and imagination (social theory) in order to better discern what the people of God is doing, which may well give a clue as to what God is doing. At the same time, a practical theologian is not simply relying on people's assertions about belief and observation of practices as a guide to what God is doing. The claims made by people can be weighed alongside insights derived from the history of the wider church, Scripture's witness to revelation, and doctrine.

In summary, sociology can assist theology in several ways. First, sociology can help theologians be attentive to the empirical reality of lived religion in its social context. Theologians, if they are to engage with the visible church, everyday religion, and contemporary culture, must recognize that ecclesial communities are inextricably bound up with the cultural contexts they are situated within. Sociology can help theology see empirical reality in new ways and with greater clarity. Second, sociology can assist the theologian to establish whether or not a gap exists between theological vision and lived religion. The theologian will be in a better position to point ecclesial communities in the direction of greater fidelity to their identity living under the rule of Christ if they can first see what they are actually like in reality. Sociology helps the theologian to hold up a mirror to his own face and the church he seeks to serve. Third, sociology opens up a distinctive window on human experience. The sociologist sees, but sees differently, and offers the theologian a different imagination capable of stimulating theological reflection.

If there can be no objection in principle to a sociological perspective informing and stimulating theological reflection, how is it possible for theology and sociology to find common ground? The categories of culture and narrative offer clues to the prospect of building bridges between sociology and theology in the sphere of lived religion.

(ii) The Turn to Culture

Theology and Sociology: Culture and the Cross-Fertilization of Disciplines

The term "culture" is closely associated with the academic discipline of

anthropology. Culture, according to anthropology, is not situated primarily in the outstanding achievements of a community, what is commonly referred to as "high culture", such as intellectual learning, great works of art, and literature. Today, the anthropological sense of the term denotes "the whole way of life of a people" with particular reference to the meaning of social practice. Anthropological theorists initially construed the social reality of a culture in self-contained and static terms. However, contemporary anthropological theory acknowledges that culture is inherently dynamic and open. The contemporary conception of culture is a very influential idea in theology, the social sciences, the humanities, and popular discourse.

Sociology and Culture

Social theorists in the founding (European) period of sociology recognized culture as a category in human social life. In practice, however, the study of culture was the domain of anthropologists preoccupied with journeying to distant lands to observe societies untarnished by the modern world. Social theorists continued to place culture and society in separate compartments even if some connection between the two was admitted. Sociology proper confined its attention to elucidating the dynamics at work in human groups.

Peter Berger heralded a shift towards culture within the field of sociology at the end of the 1960s. He defines culture as "the totality of man's products. Some of these are material, others are not."[68] For Berger, society is a particular aspect of

[68] Berger, *Sacred Canopy*, 6.

culture and reflects the latter's character as a product of human activity. Sociologists began to acquire a new interest in culture in the 1970s when inherited social theory no longer seemed adequate to actual social reality. In particular, secularization theory did not account for the persistence and vitality of religion in the United States during the last decades of the twentieth century. It became necessary to study culture in order to ascertain why religion persisted when theoretically it should be waning. The discipline of sociology appropriated an anthropological perspective on culture.

The turn to culture in sociology is especially evident in the study of religion, particularly in the field of congregational studies. Nancy Ammerman offers a definition of culture in *Studying Congregations: A New Handbook*, "Culture is who we are and the world we have created to live in."[69] Each congregation is distinctive; it creates its own particular style and way of doing things. A congregation makes sense of the world through the stories it tells, the practices it employs to sustain faith, and the objects it creates or appropriates. All three elements combine to give a particular shape to congregational life. A culture is something created by a group of people; it is not a fixed and inflexible entity. Moreover, the culture constructed by a congregation is not created out of nothing. The elements that go into making a congregation are typically derived from a specific religious tradition. "What each congregation cooks up, then is always a mix of their own creativity and larger traditions."[70] The dynamics

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[69] Nancy T. Ammerman, "Culture and Identity in the Congregation," in *Studying Congregations: A New Handbook*, ed. Nancy T. Ammerman, Jackson W. Carroll, Carl S. Dudley, and William McKinney (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 78.

[70] Ibid., 79.

within a congregation are influenced by several elements: social and economic conditions, local culture, history, geographic location, denomination, demographic profile, and size. A congregation is created out of a diverse collection of materials. No congregation is ever static.

The turn to culture in sociology has resulted in a focus on the contingent and embodied nature of congregations. Attention has increasingly focused on accounts (the stories that congregations and the individuals that constitute them tell), activities (corporate practices of faith), and artifacts (the objects people of faith produce and employ such as places of worship). Focusing on culture has opened sociology up to seeing a familiar reality through different eyes.

Theology and Culture

Theologians have long been concerned with the church's relation to society. In the first decade of the twentieth century Ernst Troeltsch agonized over the church's relation to the social order. His monumental *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches*[71] is an account and analysis of Christianity from the first century to the eighteenth century. Troeltsch concentrates his attention on the development of the church in Western Europe. The *Social Teaching* made its debut amidst the optimism that characterized culture and Christianity in Western Europe in the opening years of the twentieth century. Troeltsch did not share the optimism of many of his contemporaries. In his opinion a cultural confusion and crisis threatened the fabric of

[71] Ernst Troeltsch, *The Social Teaching of the Churches*. 2 vols (London: Allen and Unwin, 1931; reprint Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992).

Western civilization. The intellectual foundations upon which Western Christianity was built were in the process of crumbling. Troeltsch was also preoccupied with a personal intellectual struggle over the nature of history. Historical study, he concluded, can no longer be used to "prove" the truth of the Christian faith. Yet, at the same time, Troeltsch strained to discern a solution to the problem of Christianity's relation to the modern world. He cared about the church and its future. Troeltsch believed the church in his generation was confronted with a profound "social problem."[72] He defined the "social problem" as a tension between the State (political power) and Society (social realities and networks distinct from the State but influenced by it). The church was an example of such "sociological phenomena."[73] Troeltsch set out to answer one central question, "How can the Church harmonize with these main forces in such a way that together they will form a unity of civilization?"[74] He advanced a three-fold typology of concrete manifestations of Christianity to express different sets of theological priorities and responses to society. First, the church type sought a harmony with society and erred on the side of accommodation. Second, the sect type resisted compromise with wider society and tended to withdraw into isolation. Third, the mystical type is more individualistic and stresses personal and inward experience. Troeltsch, in formulating his typology, was responding to ideas originating in the realm of European high culture and broad

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[72] Troeltsch, *The Social Teaching* vol. 1, 28.

[73] Ibid., 28.

[74] Ibid., 32.

social, political, and economic movements transforming European societies, which impacted Western Christianity.

Troeltsch's approach to the church's relation to wider society, developing a typology as a heuristic tool to make sense of concrete expressions of Christianity, is echoed in more recent theological reflection. Martyn Percy argues for a variety of theological conversations with contemporary culture in *Salt of the Earth: Religious Resilience in a Secular Age*.[75] He concludes that the church typically makes two basic responses to culture: accommodation or resistance. Ian Markham critiques and adapts Percy's work and proposes a third response to culture: theological engagement. For Markham, theological engagement means staying rooted in the Christian tradition and simultaneously taking contemporary culture seriously. A theology of engagement in Markham's terms is open to being transformed by the encounter with culture. Percy appropriates Markham's modification of his typology of church responses to culture in *Engaging with Contemporary Culture: Christianity, Theology and Concrete Church*[76] and suggests that practical theology is the best way of advancing the kind of engagement with contemporary culture that he strives for:

> Fundamentally, practical theology is rooted in a determined form of research that often begins by learning to *listen deeply* and *well* - giving a subject or issue some serious and respectful non-directive attention in the first instance, whilst not foreclosing on the possibility of critiques and the development of a critical practical theology.[77]

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[75] Martyn Percy, *The Salt of the Earth: Religious Resilience in a Secular Age* (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001).

[76] Martyn Percy, *Engaging with Contemporary Culture: Christianity, Theology and the Concrete Church* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005).

[77] Ibid., 8.

Percy and Markham extend Troeltsch's interest in the relation between church and society into the twenty-first century. What evidence is there that practical theology is listening to the contemporary church in its cultural settings? Percy proffers case studies in *Salt of the Earth* and *Engaging with Contemporary Culture*, mostly drawn from the realm of Anglican ecclesiastical politics in England and American Christianity. He incorporates very little research and reflection on British Christianity beyond the orbit of the Church of England, even though he is writing out of an English ecclesiastical and cultural context.

A more anthropological approach to culture, which is germane to *Living with Jesus*, is being advanced in the field of systematic theology. In *Theories of Culture*: *A New Agenda for Theology* the systematic theologian Kathryn Tanner contends that an anthropological notion of culture is useful to theology.[78] She has in mind a modified concept of culture, which eschews the older notion that cultures are static and defined by closed borders. Instead, culture is viewed as dynamic and open. Consequently, Tanner refutes the idea that the Christian community is a distinct social group insulated from other cultural groupings. She notes that Christian communities have not, in general, attempted to substitute existing social functions with their own.[79] An absolute divide between Christian communities and the cultures that they inhabit cannot be sustained in theory or practice. Christian communities overlap and share

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[78] Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 61-92.

[79] Ibid., 93-110.

elements with the cultures they are set in. Furthermore, theologians must recognize that theology is a part of culture. Indeed, theology is a product of human activity. Tanner argues that the task of academic theology is to reflect upon the everyday theology reflected in the social practices of Christian faith. "Christian theology has to do with the meaning dimension of Christian practices."[80]

A turn to culture is also evident in the realm of practical theology. Pete Ward welcomes theology's turn to culture in *Participation and Mediation: A Practical Theology for the Liquid Church*.[81] Ward utilizes the tools of cultural studies to describe and interpret several tangible manifestations of Christianity in the context of contemporary English culture. He views the turn to culture as a promising development for those training for pastoral ministry and ministers seeking to enhance their capacity to reflect theologically on the practice of ministry. According to Ward the discipline of practical theology has been shaped by a dualism between experience and doctrine characteristic of modern theology at large that does not resonate with ministerial practitioners. Ministers encounter ideas about God "connected and conditioned by historical and social realities."[82] A theological method oriented to culture moves away from "disembodied theology" and locates doctrine in ecclesial practices, Christian tradition, and Christian community. Ministers typically work with embodied forms of doctrine: sermons, liturgies, hymns, pastoral decisions, and

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[80] Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 85.

[81] Pete Ward, *Participation and Mediation: A Practical Theology for the Liquid Church* (London: SCM Press, 2008), 33-50.

[82] Ibid., 47.

mission programs. Theological thinking is evident in these various expressions of faith. Ward asserts, "This kind of thinking is not different in essence from academic reasoning."[83] Church members that participate in a study group, listen to teaching at a Christian festival, or read a book from a Christian bookstore engage in activities continuous with academic theology. "The difference between these forms of practical thinking and the practice of academic reasoning has more to do with focus and attention rather than with any disciplinary boundary."[84]

The turn to culture enables sociologists and theologians to focus on the same embodied realities, the visible church and everyday religion, which are subject to social and historical contingencies. But what exactly is the sociologist of religion and practical theologian meant to be listening for?

(iii) Narrative and Conceptualizing Human Identity

Narrative and Human Identity

A study of lived religion (the visible church and everyday religion) is an inquiry into the identities of human beings, which are constantly being formed and reformed in a web of overlapping and intersecting social contexts. Contemporary social theorists propose narrative as a conceptual model to represent the dynamic

[83] Ward, *Participation and Mediation*, 48.

[84] Ibid.

quality of identity in human life and experience.[85] The concept of narrative increasingly bridges the social sciences and theology. Both disciplines have given significant attention to narrative. Margaret Somers claims, "(A)ll of us come to be who we are (however ephemeral, multiple, and changing) by being located or locating ourselves (usually unconsciously) in social narratives."[86] Human identity can be construed as a set of stories people tell about themselves. These stories are multi-layered.[87] Many different narratives intersect in human experience: family, work, religion, gender, and race. Narrative serves as a theoretical framework for the formation of religious identities in the people and congregations studied in this dissertation. Three basic layers of story are present in human life: autobiographical narratives, public narratives, and meta-narratives.[88] The term "narrative" in this context refers to the stories people tell about human lives and experiences: events, relationships, objects, and practices.

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[85] Nancy T. Ammerman, "Religious Identities and Religious Institutions," in *Handbook of the Sociology of Religion*, ed. Michele Dillon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 207-224; Margaret E. Somers, "The Narrative Constitution of Identity: A Relational and Network Approach," *Theory and Society* 23 (1994): 605-649.

[86] Somers, "Narrative Constitution", 606.

[87] Somers proposes four categories of narrative: "ontological" (the stories individuals tell about themselves), "public" (the stories told by corporate entities and institutions), "conceptual" (the theoretical frameworks devised by those that study social action", and "meta-narratives" (the large stories that determine how other stories are shaped).

[88] Nancy Ammerman has adapted these three categories from Somers' theory.

Three Types of Narrative

Autobiographical narratives consist of the stories I tell about myself. These are the stories stored in an individual's head about the way his life has unfolded and taken shape. Autobiographical narratives refer to the unique experience of an individual person and describe how he sees himself. They include the relational interactions that are part of that personal story. A person's autobiographical narratives are normally formed in the context of public narratives and meta-narratives.

Public narratives refer to collective groups of people and their collective identities. A university, a congregation, a denomination, a city, a nation, and a workplace all constitute types of public narrative. Individuals normally participate in multiple public narratives. A critical question, therefore, is to ask: what public narratives are at work in a particular individual? How do different narratives interact with each other? For the purpose of "Living with Jesus", it is necessary to ask: what are the relevant public narratives present in a congregation? How do these public narratives interact with individual lives?

Meta-narratives are stories that encompass more or less everything. The Enlightenment is a meta-narrative; it claims the world is getting more and more rational. The Bible witnesses to the story of God, a meta-narrative that from a Christian perspective finds its focus in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Several meta-narratives may be operative and competing for attention in the visible church and everyday religion.

We tell stories about the individual self, the social worlds we inhabit, and the meaning of life, the universe, and everything. Ethnographic tools of research enable practical theology to identify the autobiographical narratives present in the everyday religion of individual Christians and the public narratives operative in the corporate practices of the visible church. Identifying these narratives is the first step in the process of placing the visible church and everyday religion in dialogue with Christian doctrine.

The social realities examined by "Living with Jesus", the corresponding types of narratives, and types of theological discourse can be represented as follows:

Table I: Social Reality, Type of Narrative, and Type of Theology

Social Reality	Type of Narrative	Type of Theology
Church	Public Narrative	Congregational Theology
Everyday Religion	Autobiographical Narrative	Everyday Theology
Christian Doctrine	Meta Narrative	Academic Theology

The Story of God and Our Stories in Dialogue

Congregations in Transition[89] by Nancy Ammerman and Carl Dudley challenges the insularity that characterizes much sociology and theology. This guide for congregations utilizes insights garnered from empirical studies of congregations in

[89] Carl S. Dudley and Nancy T. Ammerman, *Congregations in Transition: A Guide for Analyzing, Assessing, and Adapting in Changing Communities* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2002).

changing contexts, reported in *Congregation and Community*,[90] also by Nancy Ammerman, to help churches evaluate their present condition to discern and formulate strategies for congregational renewal and growth. The program of self-evaluation and planning is set within the framework of the story of the Exodus from the Old Testament, because the authors believe such a program to be a spiritual process, not merely an exercise in research, analysis, strategic formulation, and practical implementation. Israel's journey from captivity in Egypt to the Promised Land frames the practical exercises and stimulates research and reflection. The use of a story from the Old Testament is suggestive and symbolic. A story can stir the imagination, prompt reflection, and inspire faith to act. The Biblical narrative can evoke a sense of identification with characters and events. The members of a congregation can also picture themselves as part of a bigger story that is still unfolding in the purposes and action of God.

Enabling Divine and Human Stories to Interact

Congregations in Transition is designed to help a congregation see its corporate life from two perspectives, the sociological and theological. The story of a congregation in transition (discovered using the tools of sociological research) is framed with reference to the Old Testament story of the Exodus (portrayed in Scripture). Two stories, congregational and Biblical, are intended to enter into dialogue with each other.

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[90] Nancy Tatom Ammerman, *Congregation and Community* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997).

Congregations in Transition unearths first order theology and enacts a first order theological method. Part of the Christian story, contained in the Old Testament, illuminates the story of a congregation embodied in its activities, accounts, and artifacts. Second order theology consists of careful and rigorous reflection upon the Christian story, beliefs, and practices. Historical theology and systematic theology are examples of second order theology. "Living with Jesus" goes beyond *Congregations in Transition* by identifying the beliefs embedded in the stories of everyday life and congregational practices. How have sociologists of religion historically attempted to study religion?

(3) Scholarship and Christology

(i) Methods to Study Religion: Surveys and Congregational Studies

Two principal methods are employed to study religion. First, sociologists of religion gather data on religion in America by means of surveys. Religious surveys are, broadly speaking, of two kinds.[91] The first, exemplified by the General Social Surveys, conducted by the National Opinion Research Center out of the University of Chicago since 1972, and surveys conducted by the Gallup Organization, entail administering long interviews to a small number of Americans on a wide range of topics, including religion. The second is illustrated by the 2001 American

[91] Vast amounts of survey data are now easily accessible via the Internet. See University of Michigan Documents Center – www.lib,umich.edu/govdocs/stsoc.html; Association of Religion Data Archive – www.thearda.com; The Pluralism Project – www.pluralism.org; Hartford Institute for Religion Research - http://hirr.hartsem.edu.

Identification Survey,[92] conducted by the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, which asked a few questions about religion to a large number of Americans.[93] One significant exception to these two basic approaches now exists. The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life published the results of the *U.S. Religious Landscape Survey*, based on interviews with 35,000 Americans, online in 2008.[94] This extensive survey examines the religious profile, religious beliefs and practices, as well as social and political attitudes of the American public.

The Pew Survey presents a broadly based picture of American belief and practice. The results indicate, for instance, that Americans feel comfortable in switching religious affiliation. Over a quarter of American adults (28%) have left the faith they were raised in for another religion or no religion at all. If people switching within Protestant denominations are incorporated in the analysis, 44% of Americans age 18 and over have either switched religious affiliation from one faith group to another, changed from being unaffiliated to being attached to a faith tradition, or disengaged from involvement with a faith tradition of any description whatsoever. The proportion of people unaffiliated as adults (16.1%) is significantly higher than the number unaffiliated as children. *The Religious Landscape Survey* also suggests that American religion is non-dogmatic, diverse in its practices, and makes a big impact on political orientation.

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[92] Barry A. Kosmin, Egon Mayer, and Ariela Keysar, *American Religious Identification Survey 2001* (New York, NY: The Graduate Center of the City University of New York, 2001).

[93] Ibid., 6. 50,281 American residential households were surveyed.

[94] http://religions.pewforum.org.

In addition to surveys, sociologists of religion employ various qualitative methods to study congregations[95] and, to a lesser extent, historic denominations[96] and new church networks,[97] especially their internal social dynamics and relation to society. Few congregational studies, however, examine the theology embodied in the congregational practices of worship and mission in great detail. Congregational studies do not typically unearth the perceptions of participants in congregational worship and mission. Nor do many explore everyday theology. Little is known or understood about the impact upon Christians of participation in non-religious practices and practices associated with religions other than Christianity.[98]

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[95] Nancy Tatom Ammerman, *Bible Believers: Fundamentalists in the Modern World* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1987); *Congregation and Community* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997); *Pillars of Faith: American Congregations and Their Partners* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); Penny Edgell Becker, *Congregations in Conflict: Cultural Models of Local Religious Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Mark Chaves, *Congregations in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004); Michael Emerson with Rodney M. Woo, *People of the Dream: Multiracial Congregations in the United States* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006); Marti Gerardo, *A Mosaic of Believers: Diversity and Innovation in a Multiethnic Church* (Bloomington, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2005): Dawne Moon, *God, Sex, and Politics: Homosexuality and Everyday Theologies* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004); Timothy Nelson, *Every Time I Feel the Spirit: Religious Experience and Ritual in an African American Church* (New York: New York University Press, 2005); G.A. Pritchard, *Willow Creek Seeker Services: Evaluating a New Way of Doing Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1996); R. Stephen Warner, *New Wine in Old Wineskins: Evangelicals and Liberals in a Small-Town Church* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988); James P. Wind and James W. Lewis, ed., *American Congregations* 2 vols (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

[96] Nancy Tatom Ammerman, *Baptist Battles: Social Change and Religious Conflict in the Southern Baptist Convention* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1990); Dean R. Hoge, Benton Johnson, and Donald A. Luidens, *Vanishing Boundaries: The Religion of Mainline Protestant Baby Boomers* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994); David A. Roozen and C. Kirk Hadaway, ed. *Church and Denominational Growth* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993).

[97] Donald Miller, *Reinventing American Protestantism: Christianity in the New Millennium* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

[98] Knowledge of participation in non-Christian religions is mostly anecdotal. John H. Berthrong, *The Divine Deli: Religious Identity in the North American Cultural Mosaic* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999).

Peter Berger, while acknowledging the immense value of the insights generated by research into the beliefs of individuals in society and study of congregations, astutely observes, "But what both have in common is remoteness from much of what constitutes the reality of religion in the lives of many people."[99] The review of the study of the visible church and everyday religion the follows in this section of the literature review confirms the assessment made by Berger, although some evidence of innovative research into lived religion is now beginning to appear.

(ii) Critical Insights into Social Life

Research into the social life of Americans during the last two decades calls into question many of the operating assumptions made in the past about the corrosive impact of social forces on the place of religion in personal and public life. The relation between religion and modern society is far from simple or straightforward. Three insights especially help us to understand human interactions in society and are relevant to the research undertaken in this dissertation.[100]

First, all institutional boundaries are porous.[101] Modern society in America is complex with multitudes of distinct and specialized realms of activity such as family, work, education, leisure, and religion. In practice, people participate in many different spheres of human activity and communicate across institutional boundaries.

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[99] Peter L. Berger, "Foreword" in *Everyday Religion: Observing Modern Religious Lives* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), v.

[100] Nancy T. Ammerman, *Spiritual Narratives in Everyday Life* (Project Proposal, 2005), 2-3.

[101] Robert Wuthnow, *Loose Connections: Joining Together in America's Fragmented Communities* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 58-82.

Organizations frequently learn from each other. Individuals carry assumptions, ways of thinking, expectations, and practices from one sphere of human activity to another. Thus, an informal conversation over a meal at home turns to consider events that unfolded at work or college. A workplace may make demands that conflict with a person's religious sensibilities. Alternatively, it may offer opportunities to witness to the significance of religion to an individual in his or her daily life. Multiple influences are at work in individuals and organizations and move to and fro between the many different locations where human life is experienced and worked out.[102] It is hard to claim that any single logic adequately explains who we are, why we do certain things, or the way we do them. A study of the visible church, everyday religion, and Christian doctrine with a view to understanding how they intersect resonates with the insight of social researchers that multiple influences are operative in individual human lives.

Second, people carry narratives and practices that embody their beliefs and understanding of how the world works across institutional boundaries. These bundles of beliefs are not coherent and consistent conceptual frameworks. They give expression to assumptions about the nature of spiritual realities and their interaction with the cosmos and human affairs:

[102] This observation does not deny that people can and do compartmentalize the different domains of their lives; it recognizes that the different domains of life are not necessarily or inevitably insulated from one another.

> Ideas about the nature of God and of the world are most often carried in stories and rituals. We don't tell stories about God intervening in the world if we don't believe that God exists, but what we know about divine character and divine interaction with humanity is carried by the stories, and those stories play out across the domains of our lives.[103]

Identifying the beliefs embedded in stories and practices is no straightforward pursuit. The task calls for interpretation and imagination to give clear expression to beliefs that may be indirectly articulated in stories and unconsciously at work in practices. The insight that beliefs are embedded in stories and practices means that high priority is attached to listening to the various stories at play and observing the practices present in the congregations studied in "Living with Jesus".

Third, religion is more varied and complex than has often been acknowledged. In reality, religion is more than a set of officially prescribed beliefs and practices. A broader notion of what constitutes "religion" is required. Simply paying attention to congregational practices and the beliefs preached from a pulpit fails to circumscribe religion. Measuring religion on the basis of agreement or disagreement with propositional statements of belief and regularity of attendance at a house of worship affords a very limited glimpse into the experience and meaning of religion in human life. Traditional religious institutions and teachings continue to inform Christian lives in America, but the range of influences shaping the contemporary religious sensibilities of Christians in the United States is much broader. American Christians are encountering adherents of other world religions as neighbors and work colleagues. Mosques and Buddhist meditation enters are observable features of the built

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[103] Ammerman, *Spiritual Narratives in Everyday Life*, 2.

environment alongside churches and synagogues. Anecdotal evidence exists that some American Christians are exploring the practices of other world religions.[104] Since the relaxation of immigration restrictions in 1965, global Christianity has become a major presence in the United States and signals a de-Europeanization of American Christianity.[105] Ease of travel and modern communications technology mean that religious ideas and practices constantly move backwards and forwards across territorial borders.[106] It is worth noting from a historical perspective that in relation to Christianity there have always been examples of people who are religious in ways that depart from "normative" expressions of belief and practice.[107] Indeed, periodic encounters with "unorthodox" beliefs prompted the inquiry at the heart of this dissertation.

The Visible Church

Systematic Theology: From Blueprints to Concrete Reality

Critical theological reflection on the empirical reality of the church is gaining ground both as a stated aspiration and, to a lesser extent, practice in the field of systematic theology. William Cavanaugh's evocative account *Torture and Eucharist:*

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[104] John H. Berthrong, *The Divine Deli: Religious Identity in the North American Cultural Mosaic* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999).

[105] R. Stephen Warner, "The De-Europeanization of American Christianity," in *A Church of Our Own: Disestablishment and Diversity in American Religion* (2004) (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 257-262.

[106] Peggy Levitt, *The Transnational Villagers* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001), 159-176.

[107] Concern for authentic Christian doctrine and practice is a prominent theme in the epistles of the New Testament.

Theology, Politics, and the Body of Christ[108] is an especially innovative study in ecclesiology. It does not begin with the formulation of an ideal model of the church, but instead examines the tangible social reality of the Catholic Church in a particular context. Cavanaugh presents an historical, sociological, and theological description and analysis of the Catholic Church and its response to the state's use of torture in Chile during the Pinochet dictatorship. He demonstrates that the Catholic Church in Chile embraced a set of theological commitments about the nature of the church and its relation to the state that initially inhibited it from recognizing the growing evil evident in the political order.[109] Theology restricted the Catholic Church's capacity to imagine resisting the use of torture by the state. The Chilean state deployed torture as a practice to atomize individuals from one another. In effect, torture was used by the Pinochet regime as a form of social discipline to undermine any social organization, such as political parties, trade unions, and the Catholic Church, capable of asking awkward questions, voicing criticism, or mobilizing opposition. The state employed torture to disrupt any form of social solidarity perceived as a threat. Torture became an ecclesiological problem precisely because it was used by the state to intimidate and attack the Catholic Church. The Pinochet years in Chile were a time of crisis marked by social turmoil that compelled the Catholic Church to revisit its theological self-understanding. The Catholic Church concluded that it could no longer see itself simply as the soul of society, a mystical body dispersed throughout the social order,

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[108] William T. Cavanaugh, *Torture and Eucharist: Theology, Politics, and the Body of Christ* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998).

uncritically lending its support to the authority and power of the state. It became necessary for the Catholic Church to recover a sense of itself as a social body called to be loyal to the Gospel, which sometimes requires the church be opposed to the state. Consequently, the Catholic Church intentionally engaged in practices designed to foster social solidarity and resistance to tyranny. Cavanaugh interprets the Eucharist as an ecclesial practice that cultivated social solidarity and resistance among Catholics in contradistinction to the anti-social practice of torture.

Torture and Eucharist is significant for four reasons. First, it illustrates that theology can function as a theoretical blinder to empirical reality among church leaders and theologians as much as any social theory may close the eyes of sociologists to empirical reality.[110] A theological narrative can "police" the church just as much as any imported or imposed secular theory. Careful study of culture, history, and social life offers the theologian a different perspective from which to view reality and potentially expose contradictions between the Gospel and the church. Second, Cavanaugh's examination of the culture of the Catholic Church in Chile and the context it inhabited during the Pinochet years illustrates how the church is bound up in a web of contingent circumstances and that the practice of theology is itself a part of culture. Third, *Torture and Eucharist* shows how fresh theological thinking is precipitated when human experience (torture) begins to contradict inherited theological commitments (a particular type of ecclesiology). Fourth, Cavanaugh

[110] Nancy T. Ammerman, "Christian Scholarship in Sociology. Twentieth Century Trends and Twenty-First Century Opportunities," *Christian Scholar's Review* 29, no. 4 (2000): 686-694.

anticipated calls from systematic and practical theologians for critical theological reflection on the visible church and engagement with contemporary culture.

Nicholas Healy argues for a model of empirically informed theological reflection[111] in *Church, World, and the Christian Life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology*.[112] Ecclesiology is "critical theological reflection that is centered on the nature and function of the Christian church."[113] Healy observes that much contemporary theological reflection on the church is abstract and theoretical. Theologians are inclined to produce "blueprints" of what the church is meant to be like in its ideal state. The messy, empirical, and habitually sinful reality of the church tends to be ignored. In Healy's opinion ecclesiology is a discipline that needs to be fundamentally oriented towards the empirical reality of the church. *Church, World and the Christian Life* is a sustained and rigorous plea to theologians to pay close attention to the empirical reality of the church in social context. Theological work on the church needs to be "the critical theological analysis of these contexts and the present shape and activity of the Church within them."[114] Healy advocates a "*practical*" ecclesiology that engages with the "concrete existence" of the church and the application of a "*prophetic*" perspective that serves to make critical and

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[111] See also Nicholas Adams and Charles Elliott, "Ethnography is Dogmatics: Making Description Central to Systematic Theology," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 53, no. 3 (2000): 339-364.

[112] Nicholas M. Healy, *Church, World, and the Christian Life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

[113] Ibid., 1.

[114] Ibid., 39.

constructive theological evaluations. The purpose of ecclesiology, according to Healy, is to enable the church to fulfill its mandate to witness to the Gospel and make disciples.[115] To accomplish these purposes ecclesiology must reckon with the frequently sinful and messy embodied reality of the church. Yet, ultimately, knowledge of God must determine the shape of the concrete church if it is to be faithful to the Gospel.

Theologians cannot escape the fact that the church is an embodied social reality characterized by a set of beliefs and practices, which is situated in a particular context. Church and culture are interconnected. Hence, the concrete church, since it is a social reality, is capable of undergoing investigation and critical reflection. In Healy's view the social sciences are valuable in helping the theologian to study and make sense of the concrete church, the church as it actually is. Disciplines like history, sociology, and ethnography ought to be utilized in a modified form. Healy echoes John Milbank and advocates "a theological form of sociology" or "Christian sociology" or "ecclesiological ethnography".[116] Healy does not elaborate on how exactly theological forms of the social sciences are to be developed.

A vast outpouring of ecclesiological studies has appeared in recent years. Healy is certainly correct that the vast majority of theological reflection on the nature of the church is theoretical and systematic. His basic point that theology, if it is to be of any service to the church, must engage with the empirical reality of the church is

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[115] Healy, *Church, World and the Christian Life*, 74.

[116] Ibid., 166-169.

cogently made. Healy, in the decade that has elapsed since the publication of *Church, World and the Christian Life*, has not implemented his own agenda; he sees it as a project for others to take up and put into effect.[117]

Healy certainly presents a useful corrective to the limitations inherent with purely idealized theological visions of the church. Yet, if the church is to be faithful to the Gospel in making disciples and sharing the good news of Jesus Christ, the church needs some theological vision of what it means to be the church in order to critique itself, affirm where it is faithful to the Gospel, identify failures, and change course where necessary. Healy's repeated critique of idealized theological visions of the church needs to be tempered, if his method is to achieve its stated intention of helping the concrete church be faithful to the Gospel.

Nicholas Healy is not the only systematic theologian extolling the virtues of paying attention to the empirical reality of the church. Alister McGrath, a prominent evangelical Anglican theologian, argues that the visible church as an observable reality is the starting point for a Scientific Dogmatics:[118]

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[117] Comment made by Nicholas Healy in plenary session at Ecclesiology and Ethnography Consultation 2008. Healy remains interested in the potential of a partnership between social science perspectives and ecclesiology; he is an active participant in the Ecclesiology and Ethnography consultation process initiated by Pete Ward of King's College, London. The first Ecclesiology and Ethnography Consultation in the United Kingdom was convened at Regent's Park College, University of Oxford 10-12 September, 2008.

[118] Alister E. McGrath, *The Order of Things: Explorations in Scientific Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 204-229.

> As I have stressed, a scientific dogmatics adopts an essentially … empirical approach to theology, which determines that the starting point is that which is *observable*, and thus requires to be explained, represented, and appropriated.[119]

Christians inhabit the tangible life and structures of the church prior to any reflection on its existence or purpose. An empirical methodology, therefore, possesses the merit of beginning at the same point as most believers. "We start with the brute fact of the existence of the church as a social reality."[120] Consequently, an empirical methodology cannot begin with an ecclesiology grounded in the doctrine of the Trinity. McGrath allows that the Trinity may be the destination in a process of theological reflection, but not its point of departure. McGrath is keen not to be misunderstood and accused of reducing theological vision to sociological description.[121] Yet, McGrath is convinced that the church as a social reality cannot be ignored. Therefore, a scientific dogmatics must begin with some attempt at observing the complex empirical social entity that is the church. The identity of the church is to be approached by looking at the phenomenon of the church as a living social reality. McGrath depicts the church as a multi-layered phenomenon. None of the different levels can properly be sifted out and assigned epistemological or theological priority. "The word *church* thus denotes an interactive system, not an aggregate of individual elements."[122] McGrath identifies several strata constitutive of the church as an

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[119] McGrath, *The Order of Things*, 205.

[120] Ibid.

[121] Ibid., 217.

[122] Ibid., 219.

"interactive system". First, the church is a physical structure, a building. The structure and form of a building set apart as a place of worship can say a lot about the beliefs and values of the community that assembles in it. Second, the church is a network of relationships. Relationships within a congregation and across a denomination span a spectrum of formal to informal types, ranging from friendships that support us in times of joy and sorrow to officers and authority structures concerned with preserving the identity of the church. Third, the church is fundamentally a community that possesses an identity, which transcends the identities of individual members without suppressing them. McGrath acknowledges that the church as a community can be explored using sociological categories, but these can never be sufficient to encompass the reality of the church. Fourth, its ideas and the narratives in which they are embedded characterize the church. McGrath's Anglican identity is illustrated by the importance he attaches to creeds shaping the identity of the church by defining membership and communicating ideas. The celebration of the Eucharist, a central practice of Christians in all places and all times, utilizes creeds and also recalls the narratives of Christian faith. Fifth, Scripture informs the life and action of the church. The witness of Scripture to the story of God is indispensable. A Christian community of faith cannot with integrity live without reference to the Bible. Sixth, the church is distinguished by its practices such as the Eucharist, baptism, marriage, and funerals. McGrath is adamant that Christian practices cannot function as the foundation of a systematic theology, because they represent only a part of the whole, but they are important in the formation of Christian character and lifestyle.

Seventh, McGrath draws upon the theology of Stanley Hauerwas and claims the church enacts the story of God and witnesses to this divine narrative.

Alister McGrath's empirical approach to theology follows the pattern of doctrinal development in the early church. The actual social reality of the church is the starting point for doctrine. Christian community existed before sustained critical reflection on Christ emerged. In other words, the experience of the church gave rise to christology, which in turn resulted in the uniquely Christian understanding of God as Trinity. The sequence can be represented in a simplified form thus:

Actuality of Church→Christology→Trinity[123]

McGrath refuses to reduce the church to a simple essence and rejects any theological methodology that begins with the Trinity. The idea of the church as an interactive system of diverse elements is a helpful perspective that acknowledges the true complexity of the church. Frustratingly, McGrath offers no hints as to how he is going to engage with the visible church as an embodied social reality. Nor does he specify which manifestation of the visible church will serve as the starting point for his projected three volume systematic theology. His position is all the more perplexing because he sides so strongly with Milbank in limiting the role of sociology in mapping the visible church; it is difficult to see how he is going to engage with the empirical reality of the church. As yet, the program he outlines remains unrealized.

[123] McGrath, *The Order of Things*, 227.

Cavanaugh's *Torture and Eucharist* anticipated the programs of ecclesiological inquiry proposed by Nicholas Healy and Alister McGrath. The fact remains, however, that most ecclesiology continues to be highly theoretical and systematic in nature. The turn to culture exhorted by Kathryn Tanner is echoed in Cavanaugh, Healy, and McGrath, but the tangible results are negligible. Systematic theologians still avoid getting their hands dirty with the visible church. Congregational and everyday theologies are rarely considered by academic theology. Sociologists of religion and practical theologians remain the scholars most likely to study the visible church in its two primary forms of congregations and denominations.

Practical Theology: Mainline Decline and Contextual Theology

The failure of secularization theory to adequately account for the relation between religion and society contributed to sociologists of religion embarking upon a new research agenda. As part of the new endeavor to understand religion in the United States, sociologists of religion focused a lot of attention on congregations. They were not alone in studying the concrete church. Practical theology also engaged in congregational studies, albeit for different reasons.

The decline of mainline Protestant Christianity[124] contributed to a renaissance in practical theology and a reshaping of the discipline in the United States during the

[124] Dean R. Hoge and David A. Roozen, ed. *Understanding Church Growth and Decline: 1950-1978* (New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1979).

1980s that resulted in attention being directed to congregations.[125] Mainline Protestant congregations experienced losses in numerical strength and organizational vitality. The influence of the denominations to which they belonged on American culture, public policy, and law steadily diminished.[126] Church leaders, theologians, and theological educators[127] began to address the many challenges confronting mainline Protestant Christianity.[128] In the flux of debate about the nature, method, and subject matter proper to practical theology, a concern for the future of mainline Protestant congregations and denominations loomed large and focused the attention of practical theology on the visible church and its relation to society.

Key contributors to the renaissance of practical theology in the United States argued that the discipline must reckon with the empirical reality of the visible church. James Hopewell reviewed the literature on congregational studies in *Congregation: Stories and Structures*.[129] His seminal work stressed the importance of listening to congregational stories and understanding congregations on their own terms. Don

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[125] Kathleen A. Cahalan, "Three Approaches to Practical Theology, Theological Education, and the Church's Ministry," *International Journal of Practical Theology* 9, no. 1 (2005): 63-94; Dave Hazle, "Practical Theology Today and the Implications for Mission," *International Review of Mission* 92, no. 366 (2003): 345-355.

[126] Robert Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988); Wade Clark Roof and William McKinney, *American Mainline Religion: Its Changing Shape and Future* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1987).

[127] Edward Farley, *Theologia: The Fragmentation and Unity of Theological Education* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983; reprint, Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2001).

[128] Dean Kelley's thesis that strict churches grow in contrast to liberal churches contributed to Mainline Protestant soul searching. Dean M. Kelley, *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972).

[129] James F. Hopewell, *Congregation: Stories and Structures* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987).

Browning, an influential voice in practical theology, urges practitioners to devote energy to the visible church.[130] The first step in his practical theological method is to compile a "thick" description, an account of a congregation within its social context from multiple disciplinary perspectives.[131] Subsequent stages in this practical theological method draw upon historical and systematic Christian resources and aimed to make strategic proposals.

The turn in practical theology within the United States to the church in context was also driven by factors influencing theology as an academic discipline. Theology became more attuned in the closing decades of the twentieth century to the fact that both church and theology are shaped by cultural context.[132] Theologies of liberation emerged in the 1960s and 1970s in South America and exposed the local features of a culture that influence church and theology.[133] The theologies of liberation advanced a methodological approach that began with human life within local cultural conditions.[134] The experience of Black Christians in the United States exposed the theological lenses worn by white theologians inherited from European antecedents.[135] Feminist theologians challenged the assumptions of white, male, Euro-centric

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[130] Don S. Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology: Descriptive and Strategic Proposals* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991).

[131] Ibid., 75-135.

[132] McClendon, *Ethics*, 35-36.

[133] Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1973).

[134] Juan Luis Segundo, *Liberation of Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1976).

[135] James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (New York: Lippincott, 1970).

academic theology.[136] The net result of these various forms of liberation theology is that an awareness of contextual factors impacting theology has played a role in validating a descriptive component in theological method and directing attention to congregations as particular cultural manifestations of Christian belief and practice.

Robert Schreiter, in *Studying Congregations*, stresses the vital necessity of paying attention to local theologies, the theologies explicit and implicit in particular congregations.[137] The primary purpose of a congregational study, he argues, is to comprehend the theology operative in a congregation.[138] Unfortunately, as James Nieman points out, scholarly research continues to ignore the theological work done by congregations.[139]

The Turn to Practices

A growing and diverse body of scholarly literature is emerging on the theme of practice. It appears in the writings of theologians, social historians, cultural anthropologists, sociologists, and moral philosophers. It is illuminating to separate

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[136] Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Liberation Theology: Human Hope Confronts Christian History and American Power* (New York: Paulist Press, 1972).

[137] Robert J. Schreiter, "Theology in the Congregation: Discovering and Doing," in *Studying Congregations: A New Handbook*, ed. Nancy T. Ammerman, Jackson W. Carroll, Carl S. Dudley, and William McKinney (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998).

[138] Ibid., 24.

[139] James Nieman, "Attending Locally: Theologies in Congregations," *International Journal of Practical Theology* 6, no. 2 (2002): 198.

this varied range of work into two broad streams of inquiry.[140] Social theorists of practice, such as Pierre Bourdieu, Michel de Certeau, and Catherine Bell, represent the first. "Within the first camp, the critical emphasis is on the hegemonic, regulatory, and structuring character of practice."[141] Practices powerfully shape human lives. They are social forces to be distrusted and resisted.

Theologians and moral philosophers represent the second stream of scholarly writing on practices. A broad range of theologians[142] seeks to reinvigorate the church and authentic Christian life by means of an intentional recovery of ecclesial practices. The theologians responsible for the second stream of literature on practice sense that a gap exists between the faith that is confessed and the life that is actually lived by Christians in church and society. A connection is made between ecclesiology and ethics. The visible church is meant to function as a community of ethical formation, a place to shape human character. An appeal is made to wider philosophical and ethical

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[140] Laurie F. Maffly-Kipp, Leigh E. Schmidt, and Mark Valeri, "Introduction" in *Practicing Protestants: Histories of Christian Life in America, 1630-1965*, ed. Laurie Maffly-Kipp, Leigh E. Schmidt, and Mark Valeri (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2006), 2.

[141] Maffly-Kipp, Schmidt, and Valeri, *Practicing Protestants*, 2

[142] Dorothy C, Bass, ed. *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997); Darrell L. Guder, ed., *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998); Miroslav Volf and Dorothy C. Bass, ed. *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002); James Wm. McClendon, Jr. *Ethics: Systematic Theology*, Vol. 1 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1986); John Howard Yoder, *Body Politics: Five Practices of the Christian Community Before the Watching World* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1992); Stanley Hauerwas, *In Good Company: The Church as Polis* (Notre Dame, ID: University of Notre Dames Press, 1995); Jonathan R. Wilson, *Why Church Matters: Worship, Ministry, and Mission in Practice* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2006); Brad J. Kallenberg, *Live to Tell: Evangelism for a Postmodern Age* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2002): Bryan Stone, *Evangelism After Christendom: The Theology and Practice of Christian Witness* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2007).

analyses of the virtuous life and character formation in relation to community, narrative, and tradition. The writings of the moral philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre[143] have been particularly influential.[144]

Theologians commending the cause of Christian practices discern deep impoverishment in the ways that the contemporary church goes about the task of spiritual formation.[145] Dorothy Bass, in her popular book on Christian practices, *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People*,[146] defines practices as "those shared activities that address fundamental human needs and that, woven together, form a way of life."[147] She offers a more rigorous definition in *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life*:

> Christian practices are patterns of cooperative human activity in and through which life together takes shape over time in response to and in the light of God as known in Jesus Christ. Focusing on practices invites theological reflection on the ordinary concrete activities of actual people – and also on the knowledge of God that shapes, infuses, and arises from the activities. Focusing on practices demands attentiveness to specific people doing specific things together within a specific frame of shared meaning.[148]

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[143] Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2d ed. (Notre Dame, ID: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984).

[144] Nancey Murphy, Brad Kallenberg, and Mark Thiessen Nation, ed. *Virtues & Practices in the Christian Tradition: Christian Ethics after MacIntyre* (Notre Dame, ID: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003).

[145] All the authors mentioned are American. A discontent with American culture and the American church are prominent themes. No parallel trend exists on the same scale in the United Kingdom.

[146] Dorothy C. Bass, ed., *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997).

[147] Ibid, xi.

[148] Miroslav Volf and Dorothey C. Bass, ed., *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001), 3.

Bass and like-minded Christian thinkers desire to see Christian lives evidence growth in the practice of virtue and integrity. They want to see faith in Jesus Christ lived out as a way of life. Advocates of a re-appropriation of Christian practices are drawn from both the mainline and evangelical steams of Protestant Christianity in America. All are persuaded that "in the self-conscious cultivation of particular types of traditional Christian habit lies the key to a renewal of the Christian life."[149]

Social theorists like Bourdieu view the social world and practices with suspicion. In contrast, Maffly-Kipp, Schmidt, and Valeri observe, "Christian theorists view such regulatory structuring as largely humane, enabling, and supportive."[150] As interested observers they do not echo the chorus of approval emanating from within the ranks of Christian scholarship. Contemporary Christian theologians who retrieve practices from the past and commend them to present day believers run significant risks:

> Such projects of recovery can too easily result in simplified and idealized narratives of practices sadly lost and then happily found; they depend largely on the discovery of recognizable practices that can be replanted in contemporary churches to flourish anew. In telling a story of recovery, what is significant, for example, is the common meaning they potentially present for Christians across time and place. Any disputes over that meaning or changes in the meaning over time are almost necessarily downplayed in the search for a usable past. In looking for relevant virtues and habits to reclaim from history, Protestant practitioners are at considerable risk of seeing their own prior assumptions, present values, and felt needs reflected back to them.[151]

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[149] Maffly-Kipp, Schmidt, and Valeri, *Practicing Protestants*, 4.

[150] Ibid.

[151] Ibid., 5.

Robert Wuthnow, a sociologist of religion, perceives problems ahead for American Christianity as a consequence of its response to the growth of religious diversity in contemporary society. He suspects Christianity will increasingly be viewed as a cultural tradition, one among many, and not as the repository of divine truth for all people everywhere. Christianity construed primarily as a cultural tradition is likely to demote belief in relation to spiritual practice:

> With practice rather than doctrine at the core of religious commitment, Christianity may even become a collection of activities, like going to potluck dinners and reading inspirational books, that run the danger of being selected smorgasbord-style in terms of whatever happens to be gratifying or convenient.[152]

Christian churches in the United States, according to Wuthnow, are in danger of becoming enclaves of spiritually inclined people held together by commitment to a set of loosely defined social practices, where doctrinal beliefs are reduced to the status of personal opinions in response to the empirical fact of religious pluralism.[153]

Nicholas Healy welcomes the interest being directed to the concrete church. He calls the turn to Christian practices the "New Ecclesiology".[154] However, Healy sounds a note of caution to those theologians attending to the concrete church and reflecting on practices. First, he points out the lack of consensus in the academy about the meaning of a practice. The exponents of practice are not always talking

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[152] Robert Wuthnow, *America and the Challenges of Religious Diversity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 282.

[153] Ibid., 281-285.

[154] Nicholas M. Healy, "Practices and the New Ecclesiology: Misplaced Concreteness?" *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 5, no. 3 (2003): 287-307.

about exactly the same thing. Second, the "New Ecclesiology" overlooks the complexity of practices performed in ordinary congregations and by ordinary people. Human agents perform practices. The intention of a human agent informs the action she performs, thus making it mean *this* rather than *that*. The New Ecclesiology ignores the place of intention in shaping the meaning of an action. It is difficult to fix the meaning of an action. As human agents we all belong to multiple cultural or sub-cultural settings.[155] These various factors intermingle in life. Christian practices are infused with non-Christian influences.[156] There can be no doubt that Christianity is always culturally expressed and adaptive.[157] Thus the performance of a particular practice may mean one thing to one person and something completely different to another. Are we necessarily talking about the same thing, even if it looks the same?

Healy also points out that there is no shortage of people who remain largely unchanged even after years of participation in Christian practices.[158] Such people show little evidence of the transformative power of the Gospel at work in their lives:

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[155] From a theological perspective, the apparent lack of change in the lives of many who participate in Christian practices raises a profound question beyond the scope of this project. How does divine action relate to human action in the Christian's growth in Christ-like character, or not as the case may be?

[156] For example, in Christian history Jewish Blessings and Roman Banquets influenced the practice of communion. See: Eleanor Kreider, *Communion Shapes Character* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1997), 28-37.

[157] See Andrew F Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Maryknoll, NY/Edinburgh: Orbis Books/T & T Clark, 1996).

[158] Healy, "Practices and the New Ecclesiology", 295-296.

> Repeated performance of behavior patterns does not, of itself, issue in the right formation of church members nor the acquisition of Christian virtues. Character is indeed formed through practices, but only as they are performed with appropriate intentions and construals. Without such, practices may foster as much as halt the decline of the center and the absorption of the church into the world.[159]

Why do the theologians of practice not engage with the spectrum of meanings attached to a practice by participants and the thorny question of how transformative practice actually is in the experience of different participants?[160]

The "New Ecclesiology" presumes alternative narratives to the Gospel compromise contemporary Christian practices. *Resident Aliens*, co-authored by William Willimon and Stanley Hauerwas, protests against the cultural captivity of the modern American church. The book is a strident polemic against American Christianity captive to an anti-Gospel culture of modernity in the closing decades of the twentieth century.[161] Bryan Stone presents a similar approach in *Evangelism After Christendom*.[162] Modernity and Christendom are depicted as rival narratives to the

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[159] Healy, "Practices and the New Ecclesiology", 295.

[160] The impact of participation in practices raises the issue of the relation between the transformative role of the Holy Spirit and human will, imagination, intent, and action.

[161] William Willimon has recently expressed serious doubts about construing Christian spirituality as a practice, not least because focusing on human practices may be a way of avoiding talk about God. See William H. Willimon, "Too Much Practice: Second Thoughts on a Theological Movement," *Christian Century* 127, no. 5 (2010): 22-25. L. Gregory Jones worried over a decade ago that the turn to practices might represent a spirituality shaped by a consumer mentality. See L. Gregory Jones, "A Thirst for God or Consumer Spirituality? Cultivating Disciplined Practices of Being Engaged by God," *Modern Theology* 13, no. 1 (1997): 3-28.

[162] Bryan Stone, *Evangelism After Christendom: The Theology and Practice of Christian Witness* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2007).

Gospel and subjected to a rigorous critique.[163] These powerful narratives have infected the church, its beliefs and practices.[164] Consequently, the church in America has capitulated to Christendom and Modernity and is in the grip of narratives hostile to the Gospel.

Stone argues that evangelism can be construed as a practice. His account critiques practices of evangelism that reduce Christian witness to instrumental techniques preoccupied with achieving measurable outcomes. However, neither *Resident Aliens* nor *Evangelism After Christendom* examines the actual beliefs and practices present in the visible church (congregations and denominations) and everyday religion of Christians.

The proclivity among the practical theologians that place Christian practices at the heart of their discipline is to theorize about the visible church from an idealized perspective, which pays insufficient attention to the actual empirical reality of lived religion in church and society. Similarly, few systematic theologians trouble themselves with the actual beliefs and practices of Christians or attempt to place systematic theology in dialogue with the beliefs and practices of people in the pews.[165] Systematic theologians can legitimately protest that few resources for reflecting on

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[163] Stone, *Evangelism After Christendom*, 111-170.

[164] John Milbank represents a British perspective on the idea of rival narratives shaping the contemporary church. See John Milbank, "Stale Expressions: the Management-Shaped Church," *Studies in Christian Ethics* 21, no. 1 (2008): 117-128.

[165] James McClendon, as will be shown in Chapter Three, did attempt to place doctrine in conversation with the individual lives of striking Christians and the troubled life of a congregation recovering from conflict.

lived religion exist.[166] The question nonetheless remains. How can Christians be helped to live out their faith with fidelity to the Gospel, if pastors and scholars do not unearth nor understand the beliefs and practices of ordinary Christians? Practical theologians are theorizing about practices for the purpose of improving Christian formation. Sociologists of religion are leading the way in studying the religious beliefs and practices of ordinary people. Actual practices need to be studied, if historic Christian practices are to be recovered and related to the contemporary world with integrity. Christian thinkers need to know what is actually happening and must not be content with merely theorizing about what should be happening. Pastors require the capacity to reflect on the beliefs and practices expressed in congregational life and the everyday lives of believers, if they are to relate the Christian faith meaningfully to the church today.[167]

Jesus Christ in Congregational Studies

If attention to theology is rare in sociological studies of congregations, Jesus Christ makes but peripheral appearances. Joseph C. Hough, Jr., offers a theological perspective on the Wiltshire Church, a United Methodist congregation, in the multidisciplinary *Building Effective Ministry: Theory and Practice in the Local*

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[166] Wesley J. Wildman, *Fidelity with Plausibility: Modest Christologies in the Twentieth Century* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1998), 13-14.

[167] Pastors also need to reflect on the practices of pastoral ministry and expectations of others that may hinder them from engaging in critical theological reflection upon the life and witness of the church. Pastors often find themselves attending to institutional, organizational, and systemic issues within congregations that compete with what they may perceive as priorities of pastoral practice.

Church.[168] Hough's summary and interpretation of the Wiltshire Church's theological self-understanding are based on research data (questionnaires and interviews provided by church members) and conversations with observers of the congregation.[169] Hough concludes that Jesus is understood to be a revelation of God only in the limited sense that he shows "the spark of the divine" more fully than any other human being. He functions as a moral example that inspires courage and hope in others. Jesus does not challenge the existing moral order in the name of the kingdom of God. The Wiltshire Church recognizes in Jesus one who welcomes children, demonstrates personal courage in the face of difficult choices, forgives mistakes, and then "denounces those who condemn persons who exhibit minor moral improprieties."[170] Jesus "saves from sins," but salvation produces no alteration in worldview. "Jesus is the prime example of a person who cared about other people and who stuck to his principles through everything."[171]

In *Congregation: Stories and Structures*, James Hopewell observes how rarely people in the congregations he studied incorporated Jesus Christ in their accounts of faith:

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[168] Carl S. Dudley, ed., *Building Effective Ministry: Theory and Practice in the Local Church* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1983).

[169] Ibid., 113.

[170] Hopewell, *Congregation*, 114,

[171] Ibid,, 115.

> As I conducted world view interviews I was surprised how infrequently, in even Protestant congregations, the name of Christ was mentioned in response to questions about crises such as death, family instability, or world catastrophes. Although the name of Christ is regularly used by church members in the intensive, self-identifying acts of worship and evangelism, it seems to be infrequently employed to fathom situations that challenge personal and corporate identity.[172]

Since Hopewell's interviewees say so little about Jesus Christ he is unable to shed much light on what ordinary Christians actually believed about Jesus Christ.

The theologians most likely to encounter everyday christologies and inquire about them are ordained ministers exercising pastoral oversight in congregations. Two pastors interested in the nature of the christologies operative in congregations have written theses on the subject submitted towards Doctor of Ministry degrees. Tyson Lee Frey's "An Instrument to Discern Images of Christ Operating in United Church of Christ Congregations"[173] begins with the premise that the Christ/Messiah concept is widely misunderstood in United Church of Christ congregations. Frey uses a survey instrument distributed to 112 congregations to identify the images of Christ operative employed within the congregations. He concludes with the observation, on the basis of 721 surveys returned, that a wide variety of titles are used to describe Jesus Christ. William A. Evensberg probes the christologies of twenty-one ordained elders in Presbyterian congregation in Greenwich, Connecticut, in "Does Jesus Still

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[172] Hopewell, *Congregation*, 165.

[173] Tyson Lee Frey, "An Instrument to Discern Images of Christ Operating in United Church of Christ Congregations" (D.Min. diss., Lancaster Theological Seminary, 1992).

Save?"[174] Both dissertations concentrate on the cognitive dimension of faith in isolation from concrete expressions of Christian faith and practice in worship, mission, and everyday life. These studies suffer from the same "remoteness" from lived religion that characterizes most scholarly research into congregations and the beliefs and behaviors of ordinary Christians.

A paucity of research into the understandings of Jesus Christ in congregational practices and everyday lives is characteristic of congregational studies, whether conducted by practical theologians or sociologists of religion. Nancy Ammerman summarizes the christology embedded in the preaching of the pastor to the Southside congregation in her study *Bible Believers: Fundamentalists in the Modern World*.[175] Sermons at Southside portray a world falling apart under the strain of destructive forces hostile to God. Jesus Christ is the only solution to problems that confront human beings in the modern world; he can save people from their sins. He will return to recover his people before the world sinks into its worst possible condition. The pastor concludes his sermons with "the plan of salvation". Hearers are invited to put their trust in Jesus Christ. He is the one and only way to salvation. Decision is required now, because tomorrow is promised to no person and the rapture can occur at any moment.[176] A decision is essential for salvation and to be prepared for the

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[174] Wiiliam A. Evertsberg, "Does Jesus Still Save? Grassroots Christology in a Twenty-First Century Presbyterian Congregation" (D.Min. diss., Princeton Theological Seminary, 2004).

[175] Nancy Tatom Ammerman, *Bible Believers: Fundamentalists in the Modern World* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1987).

[176] Ibid., 38-39.

rapture. But the most prominent beliefs evident in the Fundamentalist Christians studied by Ammerman cluster around conceptions of God, the Bible, and theodicy.[177] Mention of Christ with reference to members of the congregation is limited to the religious experience of being born again.[178]

R. Stephen Warner in his much admired study, *New Wine in Old Wineskins: Evangelicals and Liberals in a Small-Town Church*,[179] summarizes the evangelical and liberal perspectives on Jesus Christ as personal savior and prophet or principle respectively.[180] The christological outlook of the pastor of the church is summed up briefly; Jesus Christ is preached as a living person who alone can save and give life to people.[181]

Gregory Pritchard's examination of the high profile mega church Willow Creek, *Willow Creek Seeker Services: Evaluating a New Way of Doing Church*,[182] focuses on the christology embedded in the preaching and teaching of key congregational leaders, including Bill Hybels, the senior pastor, Mark Mittelberg, evangelism director, and Lee Strobel, a teaching pastor. At Willow Creek Jesus is the solution to the human predicament of alienation from God. Hybels' teaching is that

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[177] Ammerman, *Bible Believers*, 40-71.

[178] Ibid., 4, 10, 73-74,87, 159-160, 175.

[179] R. Stephen Warner, *New Wine in Old Wineskins: Evangelicals and Liberals in a Small-Town Church* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

[180] Ibid., 33-34.

[181] Ibid., 194.

[182] G. A. Pritchard, *Willow Creek Seeker Services: Evaluating a New Way of Doing Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1996).

Jesus enables people to have a relationship with God. Three points encapsulate Willow Creek's understanding of Jesus Christ. First, God became man in Jesus Christ. The Incarnation is central to the Gospel. "Christ is God incarnate and he chose to sacrifice himself."[183] Second, Christ died as our substitute. According to Hybels, "whenever someone truly forgives, he or she genuinely pays. If an owner of a lamp forgives another for breaking it, then the owner has to pay for the cost of a new lamp. Forgiveness costs."[184] The substitution of Christ's life for ours on the cross is the only payment capable of dealing with the sum of human wrongdoing. Third, Jesus Christ offers forgiveness as a free gift. Christ's free offer of forgiveness is to be distinguished from human attempts to earn forgiveness in the form of religion.

A Mosaic of Believers: Diversity and Innovation in a Multiethnic Church[185] by Gerardo Marti explores a multiethnic mega church based in Los Angeles. The stated purpose of the church is to make people "dedicated followers of Jesus Christ."[186] Marti summarizes the theology of the senior pastor, Erwin McManus, which is assumed to be the operational theology throughout the congregation. Marti's summary of Mosaic's theology clusters around four topics: God, the nature of human beings, the church, and eschatology (the last things).[187] Eschatology in the theology

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[183] Pritchard, *Willow Creek*, 178.

[184] Ibid.

[185] Gerardo Marti, *A Mosaic of Believers: Diversity and Innovation in a Multiethnic Church* (Bloomington, ID: Indiana University Press, 2005).

[186] Ibid., 1.

[187] Ibid., 69-87.

of Erwin McManus refers to the return of Christ and influences Mosaic's commitment to mission in the present. Amazingly, Marti does not include a section on christology. The reader learns next to nothing about McManus's understanding of Jesus Christ, although his aim and that of Mosaic is to make people "dedicated followers of Jesus Christ." Marti does not identify the understandings of Jesus Christ embedded in the corporate practices of Mosaic and the everyday lives of members. The assumption seems to be that members of Mosaic absorb, embrace, and live out McManus's christology, whatever that may be.

Marti's account of Mosaic is a striking illustration of the gap that exists between the research interests of theologians and sociologists of religion. It is not that the tools of inquiry to unearth congregational christology and everyday christology are not available. Sociological methods of research simply have not been deployed to get at the christologies embedded in congregational practices and everyday lives. Marti is interested in taking an in-depth look at a multiethnic congregation's response to social change, which is an entirely valid and worthwhile course of inquiry. As a practical theologian and a pastor I can appreciate Marti's description of Mosaic and his theoretical insights about social dynamics internal to Mosaic and in relation to society. However, I am also drawn to ask what people believe to be true about Jesus Christ and how such beliefs translate into congregational practices and everyday life. Marti's account leaves the reader in the dark about the content of McManus' christology, the christologies embedded in congregational practices, and the everyday christologies embraced by members of Mosaic.

Historically, as observed by Peter Berger, many congregational studies and religious surveys are thin on material relating to religion in the everyday lives ordinary people. However, current trends in sociological research and to a lesser extent theology indicate a growing interest in lived religion in all its myriad complexity.

Everyday Religion

Beliefs and Practices in Ordinary Lives

Sociologists and historians of religion increasingly recognize that the academy possesses little knowledge about everyday religion, an admission that is beginning to shape a new research agenda and open up new theoretical perspectives. David Hall, an historian of American religion, observes, in *Lived Religion in America: Toward a History of Practice*, that "we know a great deal about the history of theology and (say) church and state, we know next-to-nothing about religion as practiced and precious little about the everyday thinking and doing of lay men and women."[188] Hall and his fellow authors "acknowledge the imperative of charting the practices of the laity"[189] in the contemporary situation. In the same volume Robert Orsi argues that the move to study lived religion entails a rethinking of religion and what it means to

[188] David D. Hall, "Introduction," in *Lived Religion in America: Towards a History of Practice*, ed. David D. Hall (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), vii.

[189] Ibid., xii.

be religious.[190] "Religion is not only not sui generis, distinct from other dimensions of experience called 'profane.' Religion comes into being in an ongoing, dynamic relationship with the realities of everyday life."[191] Theology is a vital ingredient within lived experience with creative and innovative power. People do theology in contingent circumstances:

> Men and women do not merely inherit religious idioms, nor is religion a fixed dimension of one's being, the permanent attainment of a stable self. People appropriate religious idioms as they need them, in response to particular circumstances. All religious ideas and impulses are of the moment, invented, borrowed, and improvised at the intersections of life.[192]

From a theological perspective, Orsi underestimates the power of religious ideas to speak into and actually shape a situation and makes no allowance for transcendent categories like the Holy Spirit. Yet, he is correct in his claim that the study of lived religion demands an "empiricist orientation to religion,"[193] a willingness to engage with and observe the untidy concrete reality of religion, and he makes a valid point that beliefs cannot be properly understood apart from the practices in which they are embedded.

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[190] Robert Orsi, "Everyday Miracles: The Study of Lived Religion," in *Lived Religion in America: Towards a History of Practice*, ed. David D. Hall (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 7.

[191] Ibid., 7.

[192] Ibid., 8.

[193] Ibid.

Everyday Theologies

A modest number of studies explore the everyday theologies held by ordinary Christians. Dawne Moon examines beliefs about homosexuality among ordinary Christians in *God, Sex, and Politics: Homosexuality and Everyday Theologies*.[194] Moon elucidates the complex processes by which believers in two Methodist congregations, one conservative evangelical and one liberal, form "everyday theologies" that do not always correspond with the official doctrinal position of the United Methodist Church. Nicole Johnson, in a similar vein, probes the attitudes of individual Methodists towards the official teaching of the United Methodist Church in relation to war and violence.[195] Both studies illustrate that beliefs held in the pews do not always correspond with the official doctrine of the denomination.

Timothy Nelson demonstrates the impact of social location on belief, ritual, and experience in *Every Time I Feel the Spirit: Religious Experience and Ritual in an African American Church*.[196] Nelson's study of an African American Pentecostal congregation shows how human experience and belief are intimately bound up with one another. Everyday theologies, the beliefs that guide the daily lives of ordinary believers, are formed in the context of a complex intermingling of multiple factors.

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[194] Dawne Moon, *God, Sex, and Politics: Homosexuality and Everyday Theologies* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2004).

[195] Nicole L. Johnson, "Practicing Discipleship: Lived Theologies of Nonviolence in Conversation with the Doctrine of the United Methodist Church" (Th.D. diss., Boston University, 2007).

[196] Timothy Nelson, *Every Time I Feel the Spirit: Religious Experience and Ritual in an African American Church* (New York: New York University Press, 2005).

Everyday Christologies

As previously noted, James Hopewell observed how rarely Christians in the congregations he studied talked about Jesus Christ with reference to their lives outside the practices of worship and evangelism. The data on everyday christologies in American Christianity is very limited. What is available must, in the main, be extracted from studies that are not specifically concerned with the person and place of Jesus Christ either in the visible church or everyday religion. Some partial attempts have been made to ascertain the perspectives on Jesus Christ present in the everyday religion of American Christians in mainline denominations. Accounts of "lay liberals" (Christians that do not adhere to orthodox doctrine and ethics) and "Golden Rule Christians"[197] (Christians defined principally by a commitment to compassionate care of others rather than by what they believe) offer limited exploration of everyday christological beliefs. In *Vanishing Boundaries: The Religion of Mainline Protestant Baby Boomers* Dean Hoge, Benton Johnson, and Donald Luidens set out to uncover the religious lives of a cohort of Presbyterian Baby Boomers.[198] The people selected to participate in the project were all born in the period 1947-1956 and subsequently confirmed in the Presbyterian Church through the following decade 1958-1968.[199]

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[197] Nancy Tatom Ammerman, "Golden Rule Christianity: Lived Religion in the American Mainstream," in *Lived Religion in America: Towards a History of Practice*, ed. David D. Hall (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997).

[198] Dean R. Hoge, Benton Johnson, and Donald A. Luidens, *Vanishing Boundaries: The Religion of Mainline Protestant Baby Boomers* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994).

[199] Ibid., 41.

Five hundred people were interviewed. The study investigated what this generation of mainline Protestants believed. Among those connected with mainline Protestant Churches today, the majority of interviewees were described as "lay liberals." Lay liberals do not adhere stringently to orthodox Christian belief. Nor do they subscribe to high views of biblical inspiration and the claim that Jesus is the only way of salvation. They do not focus on the next world over the present one. In contrast, they fix their attention on the affairs of this earthly environment. They think that the Bible should not be taken literally and that Christianity has no monopoly on the truth.

James Wellman conducted a program of inquiry into six West Coast liberal congregations between 1998-2000.[200] He was struck repeatedly in his conversations with clergy and laypeople "at the depth of the thought and struggle that had gone into their theological conclusions."[201] The clergy and laity in these churches made decisions in the context of religious experience and reflection upon scripture. At the end of the day these mainline Protestants maintained it was incumbent upon each individual to make up his or her own mind.[202] The life of the mind was very important to these people. Wellman reports that virtually all participants in the focus groups set up for his research were college graduates and over half had a master's degree. He concluded, "This suggests a strong bias toward rational and scientifically

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[200] James Wellman, "Religion Without a Net: Strictness in the Religious Practices of West Coast Urban Liberal Christian Congregations," *Review of Religious Research* 44, no. 2 (2002): 184-199.

[201] Ibid., 188.

[202] Ibid., 194.

based knowledge claims."[203] There was also a preference for complexity over simplicity. Hence, the fact of religious pluralism makes sense in a world where God is supposed to speak through human experience and where complexity is viewed as being closer to the truth than simple explanations.

The kind of "lay liberal" beliefs reflected in *Vanishing Boundaries* reappeared in Wellman's findings. "Jesus presents God's way to the world."[204] Jesus shows the way to God, but Jesus is not the only way to God. Truth can be found in other religious traditions. "Christ is not so much the Savior who died for the sins of humankind, but the one who challenges one to service, de-centers the ego, and gives one power to imitate and follow a life of compassion."[205] The christology Wellman describes has been worked out by people conscious that they inhabit a pluralistic context. Jesus Christ is either not a savior figure at all or he is one among several savior figures, since it is believed other paths lead to God as well. Nonetheless, the ideas expressed about Jesus Christ in the West coast churches still represent a christology. The person and work of Jesus Christ are deemed to be significant for the lives of Christians today. Jesus Christ has not been displaced from the theological center, but he has been redefined. A common thread running through the "lay liberals" interviewed for *Vanishing Boundaries* and "Religion Without a Net" is that they are, mostly, still interpreting life from within the Christian tradition as part of a

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[203] Wellman, "Religion Without a Net", 188.

[204] Ibid.

[205] Ibid.

Christian community of faith. Jesus Christ is still central for their understanding of what it means to be Christian, but their notion of Jesus Christ has changed and consequently so has their conception of the Christian life.

Ordinary Christology: A Qualitative and Theological Appraisal[206] is, to date, the most rigorous attempt to study the christologies held by people in the pews. Ann Christie identifies and evaluates the ordinary christologies of thirty Anglican churchgoers in the North of England. Christie adopts Jeff Astley's definition of ordinary theology as the theological beliefs and theological reflection of believers that have not received any formal theological education. Christie conducted in-depth interviews to gather data. Three christologies are identified. First, functional christology views Jesus as the Son of God, but not God. Jesus acts on behalf of God and does things associated with God, but is not viewed *per se* as God. Second, ontological christology is consistent with orthodox doctrine that Jesus is God. Third, skeptical christology denies that Jesus is God. Christie identifies three main types of soteriology or understanding of the work of Jesus Christ. First, exemplarist soteriology considers the life and death of Jesus to be an example to follow. Second, traditionalist soteriology struggles to express any kind of theology of Jesus' death upon the cross. Third, evangelical soteriology adheres to a robust substitutionary concept of the death of Jesus and stresses the importance of personal relationship with Jesus. Functionalist christologies dominate the sample. Almost twenty people exhibit a functionalist christology.

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[206] Ann Christie, "Ordinary Christology: A Qualitative Study and Theological Appraisal" (Ph.D, diss., University of Durham, 2005).

Christie's research indicates that the ordinary christologies found in the group articulate understandings of Jesus primarily in terms of story. The Anglican churchgoers interviewed by Christie avoid metaphysical speculation. Rather, an affective dimension is a more significant element in ordinary christology. They resist learning christological dogma. Ordinary christology is mainly non-cognitive. Christie concludes, "christology at its core is a hermeneutical process not a doctrinal system."[207] It is not right doctrine that matters most in christology, but permitting the story of Jesus to shape our lives.

Christie's sample of research subjects is drawn from three rural Anglican congregations, which share the same ecclesial and theological tradition.[208] No attempt is made to compare findings from subjects drawn from congregations exhibiting different ecclesial and theological identities. *Ordinary Christology* focuses on the individuals interviewed without reference to the congregations in which they participate. It is difficult to glimpse the impact of congregational theology upon everyday theologies or comprehend what factors have influenced the formation of the ordinary christologies uncovered. The theological benchmark employed by Christie is the doctrinal affirmation about the person of Jesus Christ expressed in the ecumenical creeds of the fourth century, which are used in Anglican liturgy on a regular basis. Christie, acknowledges that some boundaries are necessary if a

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[207] Christie, "Ordinary Christology", 260.

[208] The research findings might look very different if a researcher was to conduct similar inquiries at Evangelical Anglican congregations.

christology is to be regarded as authentically Christian, but, apparently, is not greatly perturbed by ordinary believers adhering to unorthodox understandings of Jesus Christ. The most important thing is that the life of the ordinary Christian is shaped by the story of Jesus Christ.

Christian Doctrine

Although Jesus Christ is the object of Christian faith, vital to the Christian understanding of God,[209] central to Christian identity and practice, and of national iconic significance in American popular culture,[210] the foregoing review of literature shows that in the context of scholarship pertaining to the visible church and everyday religion he remains a peripheral object of interest. However, reflection on the person and work of Jesus Christ continues to be a mainstay of New Testament studies[211] and Christian doctrine.[212] No attempt is made in "Living with Jesus" to summarize the multitude of perspectives on Jesus Christ current in the field of systematic theology, because it is a task beyond the scope of this project. However, the work of one systematic theologian, Wesley J. Wildman, is considered for two reasons. First, he illustrates how a contemporary theologian perceives and responds to the cultural

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[209] Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel: God Crucified and Other Studies on the New Testament's Christology of Divine Identity* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2008).

[210] Stephen Prothero, *American Jesus: How the Son of God Became a National Icon* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2003).

[211] Reginald H. Fuller, "The Theology of Jesus or Christology? An Evaluation of the Recent Discussion," *Semeia*, no. 30 (1984): 105-116; Scott McKnight, "The Jesus We'll Never Know," *Christianity Today* 54, no. 4 (2010): 22-28.

[212] For a good summary of recent developments in christology in systematic theology see Wesley J. Wildman, "Basic Christological Distinctions," *Theology Today* 64, no. 3 (2007): 285-304.

conditions (social and intellectual) he inhabits. Second, Wildman offers a heuristic tool that can potentially be applied to illuminate the christology of James McClendon and the lived christologies operative at First Baptist Church in Jamaica Plain and Ruggles Baptist Church.

In *Fidelity with Plausibility: Modest Christologies in the Twentieth Century*[213] Wildman sets out parameters to guide talk about Jesus Christ in relation to a religiously plural world. Wildman's basic thesis is that absolutist christologies, which claim Jesus is the unique, final, and decisive revelation of God, are unfaithful to the classical doctrinal tradition and fundamentally implausible. As such they should be dispensed with. Wildman levels two charges against absolutist christologies. First, they depart from the diversity of christologies evident in the New Testament witness and dignify one element of christlogical development over all the others. Second, absolutist christologies manifest an inflexible character that fails to exhibit three virtues Wildman counts as intrinsic to the classical doctrinal tradition: intellectual vigor (the plausibility of a christology when viewed against the backdrop of secular knowledge broadly conceived), poise (a finely tuned balance in christology between faithfulness to the Gospel and credibility in relation to secular knowledge), and religious potency (the transformative impact of christology upon spiritual, ethical, and ecclesial life). Absolutist christologies fail to meet these three criteria in Wildman's view.

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[213] Wesley J. Wildman, *Fidelity with Plausibility: Modest Christologies in the Twentieth Century* (New York: SUNY Press, 1998).

Part One of *Fidelity with Plausibility* describes the problems that contemporary culture and intellectual developments pose to absolutist christologies. Wildman builds his case for the inadequacy of absolutist christologies in conversation with Ernst Troeltsch. The exemplar of German Liberal Protestant theology in the first decades of the twentieth century wrestled with the religious pluralism and intellectual currents that seemingly make absolute christologies untenable. First, absolutist christologies disregard the historical nature and contingency of Jesus Christ and knowledge claims about him. Second, the discipline of the history of religions has unearthed parallels to the Christian story and shed light on the causal development of doctrine. Third, modern sciences, natural, and human, and philosophy render absolutist christologies implausible, principally because they exclude the transcendent category of the supernatural action of God.

Part Two of *Fidelity with Plausibility* makes the case for modest christologies, which Wildman contends is the best response to make in view of the problems identified by Troeltsch. Wildman is at pains to insist that a modest christology does not necessarily equate with a low christology after the manner of John Hick who proposes that Jesus is the human being most inspired by the Spirit of God. Modest christologies can include various forms of incarnational christologies that see Jesus as instantiations of the Logos. Modest christologies are also better suited to adapting to the vicissitudes of historical Jesus research, historical changes in doctrine, and the metaphysical challenge of relating the universal to the particular. Wildman also believes that modest christologies provide a better theological foundation for ethics,

enable more plausible notions of Jesus in the dialogue with evolutionary biology and cosmology, and permits more effective apologetic witness and dialogue with other religions.

Wildman's claim that the "absolutist principle" is no longer tenable is not totally convincing. Paul E. Ritt[214] suggests four reasons for hesitating before accepting Wildman's assertion. First, key passages in the New Testament do suggest that Christ is definitive for salvation and these cannot simply be explained away (Acts 4:12; Hebrews 7:25-27; I Timothy 2:3-6). Second, Wildman does not provide a detailed examination of evidence to support his claim that an "absolutist" bias was introduced into the thinking of the church following the two-nature christology promulgated by the Council of Chalcedon. Third, Wildman is silent on many of the texts (theological and liturgical) in the history and practice of the church that clearly point to a decisive revelation and the self-giving of God in Jesus Christ. Four, the disciplines of historical critical method, history-of-religions research, and interreligious research contribute to a theological understanding of Jesus Christ, but do not usurp the Christian belief that God's saving grace is mediated through Jesus Christ and that such knowledge is the product of revelation and received by faith.

Wildman's response to the perceived cultural conditions of contemporary western societies prompts a search for a christology that is plausible in today's milieu and simultaneously faithful to the Christian tradition. His solution need not be

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[214] Paul E. Ritt, review of *Fidelity with Plausibility: Modest Christologies in the Twentieth Century*, by Wesley J. Wildman, *Theological Studies* 60, no. 1 (1999): 168-169.

accepted to appreciate the usefulness of his distinction between absolutist and modest christologies, which serves as an insightful basis for categorizing and interpreting everyday, congregational, and academic christologies.[215]

Summary

The forgoing review of literature has established the sociological and theological significance of the church, outlined a theoretical framework for making sense of the empirical data with recourse to sociology, the category of culture, and narrative, and, finally, examined the place of christology in scholarship on the visible church, everyday religion, and Christian doctrine. The next step is to summarize and interpret the christology of James McClendon (Chapter Three), which will form the basis for engaging with the Baptist congregations described subsequently (Chapter Four) and evaluating the christologies embedded in their congregational practices (Chapter Five) and the everyday lives of the ordinary believers that belong to them (Chapter Six) before proceeding to a dialogue between christologies of lived religion and academic theology (Chapter Seven).

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[215] Wildman has subsequently extended his apologetic project to a more popular level aimed at the "thinking layperson" perplexed by traditional interpretations of Christian belief but who desires to live out a vital and enthusiastic faith. See Wesley J. Wildman and Stephen Chapin Garner, *Lost in the Middle? Claiming an Inclusive Faith for Christians Who Are Both Liberal and Evangelical* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2009) and Wesley J. Wildman and Stephen Chapin Garner, *Found in the Middle! Theology and Ethics for Christians Who Are Both Liberal and Evangelical* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2009).

CHAPTER THREE

JESUS CHRIST IN THE THEOLOGY OF JAMES MCCLENDON

Christology proper is the interpretation of Jesus and the significance and meaning of Jesus for the faith and life of the believer.[1]

Biographical Sketch

A Baptist Theologian in Diaspora

James McClendon (1924-2000) was a Baptist theologian in Diaspora for most of his professional life.[2] Born, raised, and educated in Southern Baptist churches and seminaries, McClendon nonetheless spent the majority of his career as a theological educator teaching in universities and divinity schools distant from the mainstream of the Southern Baptist Convention. By his own admission James McClendon embarked upon a theological journey late in life that resulted in an exploration of a way of doing theology and being the church far removed, yet not totally disconnected, from his Southern Baptist roots.[3] This chapter presents a biographical sketch of McClendon's life, outlines the

[1] Tyrone L. Inbody, *The Many Faces of Christology* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), 41.

[2] William H. Brackney, *A Genetic History of Baptist Thought: With Special Reference to Baptists in Britain and North America* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2004), 510-514.

[3] James Wm. McClendon, Jr., "The Radical Road One Baptist Took," *Mennonite Quarterly Review*. 74, no. 4 (2000), 1—7.

core features of his theology, examines his theological method in relation to the aims of "Living with Jesus", and identifies key christological themes in his theology relevant to this inquiry into the understandings of Jesus Christ operative in everyday lives and congregational practices of worship and mission.

Southern Baptist Roots

James McClendon was born in Shreveport, Louisiana, on March 6, 1924. His father was a Methodist and his mother a Baptist. McClendon attended his mother's church as a child. He recalls deciding inwardly to follow Jesus Christ at the age of ten or eleven.[4] McClendon was baptized at the age of eleven, an event that deeply impressed itself upon his memory. Being a follower of Jesus Christ in his school years entailed reading the Bible, attending morning and evening services on Sunday, and praying at home. The Southern culture that McClendon grew up in during his youth in the 1930s and 1940s did not question segregation of blacks and whites. McClendon experienced the first pangs of conscience protesting against the racial divisions woven into the fabric of Southern society in his teenage years. The church culture that nurtured McClendon did not question the legitimacy of Christians enlisting in military service to defeat America's enemies. War was a necessary evil. McClendon responded to the call of patriotism during World War Two in his second year at college and joined the Naval Reserve. The Navy sent him to study electronics at Harvard University and Massachusetts Institute of Technology. McClendon stepped aboard his designated ship at Pearl Harbor as a commissioned officer of the

[4] McClendon, "The Radical Road One Baptist Took," 1.

United States Naval Reserve on the very day in 1945 when the peace treaty ending hostilities with Japan in World War Two was signed in Tokyo Bay. One feature of his experience as a Naval Officer would exercise a lasting influence over him, although he greeted the incident with indifference at the time. McClendon saw the results of the firebombing of Tokyo at firsthand.

McClendon resumed academic studies following his military service and earned an undergraduate degree from the University of Texas in Austin. While at the University of Texas, he responded to a call to ministry. McClendon attended Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Forth Worth where he received a Bachelor of Divinity (equivalent to a Master of Divinity) and then proceeded to Princeton Theological Seminary to take a Master of Theology degree. McClendon returned to Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary and commenced work on a doctorate with the hope of writing a thesis under the supervision of a respected Baptist systematic theologian, Thomas Conner (1877-1952). Unfortunately, Conner died and McClendon's hopes of being supervised by his mentor were frustrated. His doctoral studies focused on biblical theology, but at the same time he also broadened his knowledge of Eastern Orthodoxy, Catholicism, and Protestantism. Biblical and ecumenical impulses began to combine in McClendon's theological imagination. These themes would continue to mark his intellectual journey and development. His dissertation "The Doctrine of Sin in the First Epistle of John: A Comparison of Calvinistic, Wesleyan, and Biblical Thought" was written under the supervision of

John Newport and James Leo Garrett. McClendon completed his doctoral studies in 1953.

McClendon served as pastor to Baptist congregations in Louisiana until 1954, when he accepted an invitation to teach at the newly established Golden Gate (Southern) Baptist Theological Seminary in the San Francisco area. He taught at Golden Gate for twelve years (1954-1966) and pursued further graduate study in philosophy at Berkeley (1958-1962) and Oxford (1962-63). McClendon courted controversy in 1965-66, when he joined with a fellow member of faculty to encourage a student project raising money to help a seminarian to travel to Alabama to support Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., in a march from Selma to Montgomery. McClendon found himself at odds with the seminary's administration, which was unsympathetic to the concerns of the students. When Golden Gate terminated his colleague's employment, McClendon protested his friend's cause and duly experienced the same fate. He was constrained to find employment outside of Southern Baptist educational institutions.

Ecumenical Encounters

The University of San Francisco, a Jesuit school, hired McClendon and he became the first non-Catholic theologian to teach in a theology department at a Roman Catholic university in the United States. McClendon taught at the University of San Francisco from 1966 to 1969. During these years McClendon became increasingly disturbed by the war in Viet Nam. He concluded that it was an unjust conflict and decided to organize professors and students opposed to it. McClendon

wrote a letter to President Johnson on official university stationary opposing the war, an act that annoyed the university's administration. Not wanting to appear unpatriotic the University of San Francisco asked McClendon to resign his post.

Once again, McClendon found himself having to look for work. His search carried him far and wide across the United States. Ecumenical friendships helped McClendon find several short-term visiting professorships at Stanford University, Temple University, the University of Notre Dame, St. Mary's (Moraga, California), Goucher College in Baltimore, and the University of Pennsylvania. Eventually, the Church Divinity School of the Pacific (Episcopal) in the Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, California, appointed McClendon to a tenured position as Professor of Theology in 1971. McClendon remained at the Church Divinity School until 1989. The final period of James McClendon's career as a theological educator unfolded at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California, an interdenominational evangelical school, where he served as Distinguished Scholar in Residence from 1990 until his death on 30 October 2000.

Steps Towards Becoming an "Anabaptist" Baptist

McClendon, when reviewing the trajectory of his career towards the end of his life, identified two factors that shaped him in his years at the Church Divinity School (1971-1989). In the first place, he discovered that Episcopalians thought of themselves as both Protestant and Catholic. Yet, he found that he did not fit easily into the theological environment where he taught. Why did he feel so uncomfortable? Was it true that Baptists were neither Protestant nor Catholic? McClendon had been

taught at seminary that no connection existed between the historical development of Baptists and Anabaptists, but was such a claim true?[5] He had been assured that Baptists were a variety of Reformed Protestants. Why then, he asked himself, did a graduate of a Baptist seminary not feel at home in a theological environment shaped by Reformed and Catholic traditions? McClendon's experience precipitated new directions in his thinking, especially in relation to his understanding of Baptist heritage.

The Politics of Jesus

Secondly, McClendon read John Howard Yoder's *The Politics of Jesus*[6] shortly after its publication in 1972. "That book changed my life. Implicit in it I found an old awareness of being part of a Christianity somehow unlike the standard-account sort I had worked so hard to learn and to teach, yet somehow like what I had known as a youth growing up Baptist."[7] McClendon was persuaded by Yoder's

[5] The dominant opinion in historical scholarship views English Baptists as an offshoot of English Separatism and Puritanism. See B. R. White, *The English Baptists of the Seventeenth Century* (London: Baptist Historical Society, 1983), 21-23. Nigel Wright argues that it is impossible to rule out Anabaptist influences on the first English Baptists. The first English Baptists, who formed a congregation in exile in Amsterdam, met in a bake house owned by a Dutch Mennonite. Many of the early English Baptist congregations were formed in the Eastern areas of England where Dutch influence was strong. "Whereas the formal line of descent is most demonstrably from separatist Puritanism, it seems likely that Anabaptist ideas were circulating at the time when Baptists were emerging and were influential upon them." Nigel G. Wright, *Free Church, Free State: The Positive Baptist Vision* (Bletchley, Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2005), 38.

[6] John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Company, 1972).

[7] McClendon, "The Radical Road One Baptist Took," 5.

account of Jesus and underwent what he regarded as a "second conversion"[8] to follow Jesus in the way set out in *The Politics of Jesus*. Yoder pointed out that Jesus rejected the Zealot option to use violence. His argument resonated with McClendon, who had become an anti-war Christian in a somewhat haphazard way. Several strands of thought converged in McClendon's reading of Yoder's book: the memory that he lost a teaching job for opposing the war in Viet Nam, a conversation with Stanley Hauerwas, who had been convinced by Yoder that violence was not an option for Christians, his boyhood formation as a Southern Baptist, and the logic of Yoder's argument. McClendon became an "Anabaptist" Baptist. In short, James McClendon's life story informed the development of his theological imagination.

McClendon carried his newfound theological commitments forward by co-teaching a seminar in the Graduate Theological Union on the heritage of the Radical Reformation with Daryl Schmidt, a Mennonite graduate student specializing in the New Testament. The seminar started with the Sermon on the Mount and then traced the Radical Reformation tradition from the sixteenth century to the twentieth century. McClendon repeated the seminar in the Graduate Theological Union and subsequently taught the class at Fuller Theological Seminary.

Systematic Theology

In about 1980, McClendon concluded that he needed to do what no one else appeared to be doing: write a systematic theology. The primary community of reference for this exercise in constructive theology would be those Christians who

[8] McClendon, "The Radical Road One Baptist Took," 5.

traced their genealogy back to the Radical Reformation. McClendon began to present papers to fellow theologians from the academic guild, working out what he wanted to say in his *Systematic Theology*.[9]

McClendon completed this ambitious project shortly before his death in 2000. *Systematic Theology* consists of three volumes. *Ethics*[10] addresses how the church must live to really be the church. *Doctrine*[11] sets out what the church must teach to be the church. *Witness*[12] is a theology of culture and a theology of mission. *Systematic Theology* is intended to enable the church to critically evaluate its life, teaching, and relation with culture in the light of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. McClendon engages with the thought of great theologians, the lives of striking Christians, Protestant and Catholic traditions, modern philosophers, American church history and contemporary American society. In *Systematic Theology* McClendon does not interact with theology in the pews (everyday theology) or theology embedded in a church's worship and mission (congregational theology). Yet, elements within McClendon's work as a theological educator constitute embryonic steps in the direction of making connections between academic theology and lived religion. While serving as a professor of theology at the Roman Catholic University of San Francisco and teaching

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[9] Jonathan R. Wilson, "Can Narrative Christology Be Orthodox," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 8, no. 4 (2006): 371.

[10] James Wm. McClendon, Jr., *Ethics: Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, 2d ed. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002).

[11] James Wm. McClendon, Jr., *Doctrine: Systematic Theology*, vol. 2 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994).

[12] James Wm. McClendon, Jr., *Witness: Systematic Theology*, vol. 3 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000).

a course on Protestant theology he required his Catholic students to make a field trip to a Protestant service of worship and submit a one-page report of impressions.[13] Subsequently, McClendon attempted to build a bridge between systematic theology and congregational theology in his practice of ministry as an ordained Baptist pastor and in his writing as an academic theologian. At the time McClendon was completing *Doctrine,* he was invited to serve as the interim pastor of the congregation that he and his wife belonged to. In *Making Gospel Sense To a Troubled Church*,[14] published a year after *Doctrine*, McClendon presents sermons preached to that church. He utilizes the contents of *Doctrine* to inform his preaching to a congregation recovering from internal conflict following the dismissal of the minister in controversial circumstances. The content of many of the sermons reflect ideas outlined in more detail for an academic audience in *Doctrine*. He makes several explicit connections with *Doctrine* in the explanatory notes that accompany each of the sermons published in *Making Gospel Sense To a Troubled Church*.

The "baptist" Vision

Although a committed Baptist, McClendon conceived *Systematic Theology* as a resource to serve a style of church rather than a narrowly defined denominational tradition. McClendon wrote for Christian communities that were descended from the

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[13] James William McClendon, Jr., "Catholic University Students at Protestant Worship," *Christian Century* 85, no. 41 (1968): 1275-1276.

[14] James Wm. McClendon, Jr., *Making Gospel Sense To a Troubled Church* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 1995; reprint Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2004).

Anabaptists, who appeared on the radical fringes of the European Reformation in the sixteenth century, or shared the same basic vision of the Christian life articulated by the Anabaptists. Baptists are situated within a broad stream of Christian witness that cannot properly be identified as Catholic or Protestant. McClendon coined the term "baptist" with a lower case "b" to make clear that he was writing for this cluster of Christian communities that includes Baptists but is not limited to them.

When James McClendon released the first edition of *Ethics* in 1986 he was conscious that baptists had produced a paucity of formal theology.[15] McClendon suggests several factors to explain this phenomenon. First, baptists, especially on continental Europe historically were persecuted and so lacked the security and space to engage in sustained theological reflection. Second, in North America, the story has been different. Baptists were not persecuted and restricted in the same way as their sixteenth century forebears. Instead they responded to the theological agenda set by other traditions. Third, and most important in McClendon's estimation, baptists have not perceived the resources for doing theology that exist within their own tradition. Consequently, the potential for developing a guiding theology out of the baptist tradition remained largely unrealized. McClendon sought to make up some of the baptist theological deficit in *Systematic Theology*. He attempts to discern a "*theological center*"[16] around which a baptist theology can be built, identifies the

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[15] James Wm. McClendon, Jr., *Ethics: Systematic Theology*, vol. 1 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1986), 20-27.

[16] McClendon, *Ethics* (2002), 26.

resources critical to such a project, and makes the case for considering ethical commitments first.

McClendon acknowledges the existence of different approaches through the centuries to establishing a baptist vision, the guiding pattern by which a people or combination of peoples shape their thought and practice. The purpose of defining a baptist vision is that it might serve as a benchmark by which to test and transform the beliefs and practices of baptist communities. McClendon, based on his reading of baptist history, suggests five themes central to the identity of baptists. These themes constitute a core set of ideas that, in practice, are realized in local contexts to greater or lesser degrees. None of these themes on their own is sufficient to serve as the guiding pattern or integrating principle of a baptist vision although they remain integral to baptist identity:

1. Biblicism: A theory of Biblical inspiration is not central to the Christian life. The key point is that the Bible is the authoritative guide for Christians. Those who follow Jesus Christ (individually and in community) seek to order the life of faith, beliefs and practices, in obedience to the story of Scripture.
2. Liberty: Human beings are meant to be free to respond to God's initiative without any interference from the state.
3. Discipleship: The Christian life is made possible by the transforming presence and power of the risen Lord Jesus Christ, and is characterized by service.
4. Community: The Christian life is intrinsically communal. Christian witness to Christ is corporate and manifested in mutual aid and service to others.

5. Mission (or evangelism): Mission is central to the Christian life. Christian mission is not defined by attempts to control the course of human history, but is construed as witness to Christ and a willingness to suffer the consequences of being faithful to Christ.[17]

For McClendon, the baptist vision is a hermeneutical perspective: the contemporary church inhabits a mystic communion in Christ with the primitive church and the eschatological church. The perception of this mystic union constitutes the baptist vision, which functions as the organizing principle for the five marks of baptist identity that surface repeatedly through history:

> Scripture in this vision effects a link between the church of the apostles and our own. So the vision can be expressed as a hermeneutic principle: *shared awareness of the present Christian community as the primitive community and the eschatological community*.[18]

The church today *is* the primitive church. Believers here and now are followers of Jesus and his commands are directed to *us*. The Biblical Story, especially the New Testament, interprets the contemporary situation. McClendon summarizes the baptist vision or hermeneutic principle as "this is that, then is now."

> In other words, baptist existence is rooted in an awareness that "this [present experience] is that [biblical reality]," and that the eschatological future "then" is also the present "now.'[19]

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[17] McClendon, *Ethics* (2002), 30-31. Mission is a very prominent theme in *Systematic Theology*. McClendon acknowledges that his theological project moves significantly in the direction of prioritizing mission and he argues that the authentic church in the present is oriented towards mission just as the primitive church was.

[18] Ibid., 30.

[19] Thomas Finger, "James McClendon's Theology Reaches Completion: A Review Essay," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 126, no. 1 (2002): 121.

The vision applies to several Christian communities within the spectrum of Christian traditions. McClendon locates several distinct Christian bodies under the broad "baptist" umbrella: the Disciples of Christ, Churches of Christ, Mennonites, Plymouth Brethren, Adventists, African-American Baptists, Church of God, Southern, American, European, and British Baptists.

Core Features of James McClendon's Theology

Character Formation in Community

The formation of Christian character is the desired goal of James McClendon's theological output. His seminal publication *Biography as Theology: How Life Stories Can Remake Today's Theology*[20] and *Ethics*, the first volume in his systematic theology, both center on this topic. In reflecting on the nature of Christian ethics, McClendon came to reject the systems of ethical thinking associated with Reinhold Niebuhr and Joseph Fletcher that focused on making decisions with little or no regard to the importance of "the qualities of human character in the individual and community."[21] McClendon proposed an alternative basis for Christian ethics, "the ethics of character-in-community."[22] According to this model, a person's character informs ethical decision-making, and a person's character is formed within a

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[20] James Wm. McClendon, Jr., *Biography as Theology: How Life Stories Can Remake Today's Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1974; reprint, Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2002).

[21] Ibid., 6.

[22] Ibid., 15.

community.[23] McClendon assumes that possessing character is a precondition for making responsible decisions. "By being the person we are, we are able to do what we do, and conversely, by those very deeds, we form or re-form our own characters."[24] McClendon notes that since New Testament times Christians have stressed the vital importance of "character as redeemed by Christ, rather than in character as a natural or personal achievement."[25] Indeed, the New Testament makes clear that the character of Jesus Christ is the definitive guide for the Christian life, a point exemplified by the Apostle Paul's "hymn to Christ" in Philippians 2:5-11.

Christian Lives Challenge the Church

Starting from the premise of the centrality of character transformed by Christ, McClendon advanced the thesis in *Biography as Theology* that the lives of individual Christians can serve as catalysts for theologians to reflect on the tension between what is and what ought to be believed and lived by all. McClendon realized that the life stories or narrative experience of all Christians were significant and worth examining. He studied the lives of four outstanding Christians of the twentieth century – Dag Hammarskjöld (the first General Secretary of the United Nations), Charles Ives (a composer), Martin Luther King, Jr. (an African American Baptist Minister and leader of the Civil Rights Movement in the American South in the 1950s and 1960s), and

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[23] McClendon, *Biography as Theology*, 15-16. McClendon acknowledges his debt to Stanley Hauerwas.

[24] Ibid., 16.

[25] Ibid., 18.

Clarence Jordan (a Baptist and founder of a multiethnic communal agricultural project Koinonia Farm) – to demonstrate that theology is present in every life. "In their life stories I could find content that could speak to the main concerns of recent Christianity."[26] McClendon believed that humans are inherently "story-engaged"[27] and that this feature of human existence is as enduring as Scripture itself. Studying Christian lives opens the door to reforming theologies, making them more consistent with the Gospel, and more suitable for a new era emerging.[28] The biographies of "singular or striking lives"[29] are capable of shedding light on what communities of faith and the persons in them actually believe, and function as a challenge to live out what communities of faith claim to believe.

Convictions

A person's character is shaped by the way he sees things and does things. It is "coincident with his deepest and most dearly held beliefs and convictions."[30] An ethics of character is thus concerned with convictions. "For as men are convinced so will they live. And similarly with convictional communities."[31] McClendon

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[26] James W. McClendon, "Embodying the 'Great Story': An Interview with James W. McClendon", interview by Ched Myers, *The Witness* (Dec. 2000). www.witness.org/archive/dec2000. Accessed 06/02/2009.

[27] Ibid.

[28] McClendon was among the first theologians to argue that a new "postmodern" cultural landscape was beginning to take shape in western societies.

[29] McClendon, *Biography as Theology*, 22.

[30] Ibid., 17.

[31] Ibid., 20.

distinguishes between opinions and convictions. Opinions are ephemeral and easily changeable ideas. They do not elicit much in the way of commitment and can easily be abandoned or modified in debate and discussion. Convictions, however, are fundamental beliefs that define our identity and the way we live. They are more enduring and harder to change than mere opinions. However, convictions can be acquired and adapted. They are malleable, but not easily changed, a reality that is a basic premise and source of hope for educators and evangelists. Conversion is a real possibility:

> A conviction is a persistent belief such that if X (a person or a community) has a conviction, it will not be easily abandoned, and it cannot be abandoned without making X a significantly different person or community than before.[32]

What a person/community cares about most of all must be discovered from the person/community and cannot be assumed apart from such inquiry. Moreover, what a person/community cares about is not simply a question of rational argument and empirical evidence. Convictions are not principles; the latter are the product of abstract, reflective thinking. Rather, convictions are specific and immediate, although those who hold them may not adhere to them consciously. When discovered, convictions supply the best clue to understanding ourselves. Convictions are a "species of belief"[33] that exhibit cognitive, volitional, and affective dimensions. "Convictions are what we think as well as what we hope and feel."[34]

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[32] McClendon, *Ethics* (2002), 22-23.

[33] McClendon, *Convictions*, 4.

The normative beliefs of a community shape individuals, who must choose to affirm or dissent from them. Equally, individuals may influence the beliefs of a community. McClendon recognizes that an individual may belong to several convictional communities and thus be exposed to several different sets of convictions. A Christian, who participates in a variety of convictional communities, can experience conflict when convictions originating in different communities clash.

Convictional Discourse

McClendon does not think theology is best understood as the study of God "for there are godless theologies as well as godly ones."[35] Instead, he defines theology with reference to his concept of convictions. Theology is the practice of convictional discourse:

> It is the discovery, understanding or interpretation, and transformation of the convictions of a convictional community, including the discovery and critical revision of their relation to one another and to whatever else there is.[36]

Theology's task is to uncover the convictions operative in a community of faith, to make sense of them, evaluate them in the light of the Gospel, and discern if they are to be affirmed, modified, or abandoned. Christian convictions cluster around three categories: Christian living (moral convictions), Christian faith or teaching (doctrinal convictions), and Christian worldview (philosophical convictions). "Living with

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[34] McClendon, *Convictions*, 6.

[35] McClendon, *Biography as Theology*, 20.

[36] McClendon, *Ethics* (2002), 23.

Jesus" addresses convictions relating to the person and work of Jesus Christ and so is primarily concerned with doctrinal convictions. The convictions about Jesus Christ operative in everyday lives and congregational practices are placed in dialogue with the convictions about Jesus Christ expressed in the theology of James McClendon.

Centrality of the Great Story

James McClendon was a seminal figure in the development of narrative theology, a school of thought that emerged during the 1960s and 1970s in protest at the Enlightenment's disregard for the narrative character of religion and human life.[37] Enlightenment thought regarded stories as mythical in nature and totally unsuitable for guiding human existence. Consequently, Christian thinkers influenced by the Enlightenment sought to create a rational theology based upon self-evident philosophical foundations. The stories that the Bible told might illustrate such a rational theology, but they could not constitute it. Story was thus relegated to a secondary status within theology. However, disquiet over the Enlightenment's impact upon theology grew in the 1960s and 1970s and theologians began to search for alternative ways of doing theology. Some, including McClendon, turned afresh to Scripture and concluded that "The Great Story" about God and his dealings with the

[37] Stephen D. Crites, "The Narrative Quality of Experience," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 39, no. 3 (1971): 291-311.

world, which finds its center and focus in Jesus Christ, the story narrated in the Bible, is the starting point for theology.[38] The Great Story interacts with our human stories:

> (T)he Gospels not only identify Jesus and his first disciples; their very structure invites each hearer to accept the good news and thereby take up a disciple role in step with those in the original story. This is an invitation to enter a strange new world in which our own identities will be tinged with a new character.[39]

John Barton suggests that biblical stories communicate God's revelation, paradoxically, by showing us who we are in our human predicament and disclose the possibilities open to us in relation to God.[40] For McClendon biblical stories do not simply make known the human dilemma and potential outcomes, although he would certainly vouchsafe the truth of such claims about them. McClendon insists that the Story of Scripture (the story of Israel, Jesus, and the church) is connected to the stories of those who follow Jesus Christ today, because the contemporary church inhabits a mystic communion in Jesus Christ with the primitive church and the eschatological church.

Christological Focus

McClendon does not construct a theology based on a set of values he thinks universally acknowledged and shared by all human beings. Instead, he starts with the

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[38] Gerard Loughlin. *Telling God's Story: Bible, Church and Narrative Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

[39] McClendon, *Doctrine*, 195.

[40] John Barton, "Disclosing Human Possibilities: Revelation and Biblical Stories," in *Revelation and Story: Narrative Theology and the Centrality of Story*, ed. Gerhard Sauter and John Barton (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000), 53-60.

particular claims that the Gospel makes upon the world. The Gospel is the starting point for theology and Jesus Christ is the content of the Gospel. He is at the heart of the Great Story of God's dealings with human beings. Moreover Christians do not simply listen to stories about Jesus Christ and discern their relevance for life today. Followers of Jesus Christ encounter him as a risen presence. McClendon is preoccupied throughout his mature theological work with the significance of the risen Christ for the individual believer and the corporate life of the church:

> For present day Christians, then, the best way is to think of Jesus as the center of the Great Story that Scripture tells, the Story that holds together all the lesser stories. In it, the Holy One (JHWH-in time a name judged too holy to pronounce) discloses himself, a Character acting *within* the story to lead and shape it. The Great Story runs from Abraham to Moses to Jesus to us.[41]

McClendon cannot envisage any adequate understanding of Jesus that is derived apart from the biblical story. By its very nature the story of Jesus is irreducible and resists easy simplification. No one image (such as liberation or love) adequately summarizes the breadth of Scripture's witness to the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The story of Jesus Christ is complex and demanding. To follow him is challenging and costly.

Church Orientation

James McClendon wrote *Systematic Theology* to enable the church to evaluate its convictions and practices in the light of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. *Ethics* is designed to help Christians consider how to grow in Christ-like character. *Doctrine*

[41] McClendon, *Ethics* (2002), 48.

explores core Christian teachings and is meant to help believers to clarify what they believe to be true about God with reference to Christian practices. According to McClendon, "only a doctrine that can be lived out is viable; hence the true test of these pages is their relevance to shared life in the body of Christ."[42] Thus, the final section of *Doctrine*, examines Christian teaching on the Holy Spirit with reference to Christian community and the key practices of worship and mission. McClendon reflects his Baptist roots in his strong commitment to fostering a common life and mature relationships within congregations. He advocates patterns and principles to guide the practice of Christian worship. Finally, McClendon argues for the inherently missionary nature of the Christian life and he genuinely believes the Gospel of Jesus Christ is good news to share with the rest of the world. *Witness*, the third and final volume of *Systematic Theology*, is a theology of mission and culture. Few systematic theologians attend to mission with the sense of priority, urgency, and enthusiasm that characterizes the writing of James McClendon.

Communal Practices

McClendon observes that much of the literature in the field of spirituality is oriented to the inner life of the individual believer and is distantly related to the corporate life of the church. By way of contrast McClendon advocates guidelines for growth in Christian discipleship that hold doctrine and the common life of the church together. He conceives the Christian life as a journey characterized by a sequence of

[42] McClendon, *Doctrine*, 7-8.

four communal practices. The first stage in McClendon's sequence of growth in the Christian life is called "preparation" and is marked by the practice of catechesis or teaching and preaching, that is, instructing people in the Christian story and its significance for life. The second stage is called "conversion" and is signified by the practice of baptism. "Conversion is the aim of preparation and the onset of discipleship or following Jesus."[43] The third stage or "following" is summed up in the repeated practice of the Lord's Supper, the breaking of bread and drinking of wine, which gives expression to the disciple's resolve to keep on pursuing Christ and walking the way of the cross. The fourth stage is "soaring" expressed in the practice of communal discernment of the mind of Christ. Communal discernment is not simply about matters of church discipline (Matthew 18:15-20), but also embraces appointment to office in the church (Acts 1:15-26) and wrestling with the challenges posed by Christian mission (Acts 15:1-35). McClendon's pattern for the Christian life recognizes the vital necessity of inward transformation but emphasizes the importance of participation in communal practices to shape growth in the Christian life.

Cultural Engagement

McClendon starts from the premise that students of theology want to connect theology with culture or "the rest of what they know."[44] In *Witness* he sets out to answer the question: how must the church stand in relation to the culture it inhabits in

[43] McClendon, *Doctrine*, 137.

[44] McClendon, *Witness*, 17.

order to remain faithful to the Gospel? A Christian critique of culture is necessary to establish how and where the church must stand to be the church. McClendon is open to utilizing disciplines other than theology to inform his theological imagination. He acknowledges, for example, that sociology can discern what the church is like in actuality even if it cannot function as a substitute for theology. "Certainly theology needs empirical facts and scientific theoretical insights. Yet they do not accomplish what I must now attempt."[45] The facts and theories of sociology cannot tell the church how to be the church.

Thomas Finger accurately observes that *Witness* contains more description than theological construction.[46] McClendon engages with sociology, the natural sciences, music, literature, philosophy, visual art, and various forms of religion. Finger speculates that, perhaps, the reason for such an emphasis on culture is that Baptists have seldom engaged such data in any detail and need to understand it if they are to appropriate it critically. In *Witness*, McClendon engages with various forms of "high culture" that originate "mostly from highly sophisticated social realms."[47] He urges baptists to understand the "high culture" around them and contribute to it. McClendon does not, however, treat ordinary life in the realms of the visible church or everyday religion. He examines the lives of outstanding Christians in the course of unfolding his vision of Christian moral life in *Ethics*. A generalized vision of the

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[45] McClendon, *Witness*, 34.

[46] Thomas Finger, "James McClendon's Theology Reaches Completion: A Review Essay," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 86, no. 1 (2002), 130.

[47] Ibid.

church distilled from the New Testament is offered in *Doctrine*, but he does not engage with any tangible expressions of the visible church subsequent to the first-century of Christianity. The challenge arising from McClendon's theological project is to extend it into the realm of lived religion, an objective he himself perceived as valid and necessary but only partially realized in his own academic and pastoral work. Indeed, several reasons are apparent for using the theology of James McClendon in "Living with Jesus".

Reasons for Using the Academic Theology of James McClendon

McClendon is a Baptist theologian writing for Baptist communities of faith in a North American context. He is a critical friend that understands the theological identity, history, and contemporary cultural context of the ecclesial communities he addresses.

McClendon's understanding of the nature and method of theology points the way to placing different types of theological discourse in dialogue with one another. This goal is partially realized in his theological writings, but remains to be carried forward into the realms of everyday theology and congregational theology.

The christological focus of McClendon's theology fits the central theme of "Living with Jesus", namely, the critical evaluation of congregational and everyday christologies. McClendon is adamant that "the identity of God as Christians know it is tied to the identity of Jesus Christ risen from the dead."[48] Thus, McClendon is

[48] McClendon, *Doctrine*, 193.

classically Baptist in the accent he places on the centrality of Jesus Christ for knowing God and the importance of living, individually and corporately, in obedient trust to the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

McClendon's Theological Method

As noted in the section on convictional discourse[49] McClendon defines theology as the identification of the persistent beliefs or convictions that define our identities with a view to their transformation, where necessary, to fit more consistently with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. In the course of McClendon's theological work he implemented this method in three distinct ways. First, he provides a model for doing theological work that begins with individual lives. He researched the lives of exemplary Christians to extract the convictions at the core of their lives, relating these to convictions fashioned in the realm of academic theology. Second, he provides a model for identifying and evaluating core convictions as they are found in cultural practices. He engaged with specific examples of historic American religion and contemporary high culture. He identified the underlying convictions and goals of selected manifestations of religion in America and examined the practices that most clearly express and embody the identified core convictions and evaluated them in the light of the Good News of Jesus Christ. Third, McClendon provides a model for relating academic theology to the life of a congregation, as he related the theology contained in *Doctrine* to the congregation he was invited to serve as an interim pastor while the second volume of *Systematic Theology* was in press.

[49] Chapter Three, 139-140.

There can be no doubt that McClendon practiced theology as convictional discourse. However, a number of limitations are apparent in McClendon's application of his methodology. McClendon's research into exemplary lives and consideration of both historic manifestations of American religion and contemporary examples of high culture is restricted to literary sources. Apart from the sermons in *Making Gospel Sense to a Troubled People* there is no evidence that he applied his methodology to any other tangible form of the visible church. *Doctrine* presents generic portraits, derived from careful study of the New Testament, of the church, worship, and mission, but does not relate these convictions to concrete manifestations of Christian community and the practices of worship and mission. McClendon's concept of theology as convictional discourse, to be of service to the church as he purposed, needs to be applied in the sphere of lived religion, both everyday religion and the visible church.

Applying McClendon's Theological Method

Christopher Ellis, a British Baptist theologian, has drawn inspiration from James McClendon's understanding of the task of theology as "the discovery, understanding, and transformation of the convictions of a convictional community."[50] Ellis contends that the study of Baptist worship enables the theologian to discover the convictions of a community in order to engage in theological reflection and reflect upon the identity of Baptist communities. How then is Baptist worship to be studied?

[50] McClendon, *Ethics* (1986), 23. Ellis refers to the first edition of *Ethics*.

Several different scholarly disciplines may be used in the study of worship: historical research, contemporary survey, ethnographic observation, liturgical analysis, and theological reflection. Ellis himself employs the discipline of liturgical theology, adapting the method of the Russian Orthodox Liturgist Alexander Schmemann, to explore Baptist worship and Baptist identity.

Schmemann distinguished between a "theology of worship" and what he referred to as "liturgical theology". A theology of worship is constructed by drawing upon biblical witness, church tradition, and systematic theological understandings of God and God's relation to human beings. Theological ideas developed in the context of abstract theological systems, apart from the practice of worship, form the foundations of a theology of worship. Liturgical theology, on the other hand, studies worship to discover the theology embedded in the practices of worship and so uncover the faith of a Christian community. "As such, liturgical theology offers us a way of discovering the convictions of the convictional community."[51]

Liturgical theology, as practiced by Schmemann, proceeds in three stages. First, discover the liturgical facts. Liturgical historians and scholars that study lived practices of worship today must identify the empirical facts of worship. Second, the liturgical facts must be submitted to theological analysis. Worship is characterized by an *ordo* or pattern into which the individual components fit and make sense. Theological analysis seeks to understand the individual components of worship in the

[51] Christopher J. Ellis, "Duty and Delight: Baptist Worship and Identity," *Review and Expositor* 100, no. 3 (2003): 331.

context of the overall pattern of worship. Third, engage in theological synthesis, which expounds the beliefs embedded in worship. Ellis proposes a fourth stage. The exposition of worship needs to be submitted to theological critique to make "normative claims both about worship and the faith of the community."[52]

Ellis has experienced Baptist worship in several parts of the world, including North America and Australia. However, most of his in depth research has been conducted "within the British Baptist tradition"[53] and has relied primarily on historical investigation and contemporary surveys.[54] In effect, Ellis has extended McClendon's concept of the theological task into the concrete sphere of British Baptist Worship and identified a set of core convictions that emerge out of a careful study of historic records and data from contemporary surveys stemming from a particular Baptist denomination. Ellis has distilled a set of data and insights that can serve as a stimulus and point of comparison for studies of other Baptist denominations and congregations.[55]

"Living with Jesus" will adopt a more focused approach than Ellis by embarking upon the task of identifying convictions in two Baptist congregations.

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[52] Ellis, "Duty and Delight", 332.

[53] The most comprehensive statement of the results of his research appears in Christopher J. Ellis, *Gathering: A Theology and Spirituality of Worship in Free Church Tradition* (London: SCM Press, 2004).

[54] Ellis, "Duty and Delight", 332.

[55] Ellis detects four values operative in British Baptist Worship: (1) attention to Scripture, (2) the importance of devotion or personal faith and openness to the Holy Spirit (3) the church gathered provides a communal context within which worship occurs, and (4) an eschatological horizon or orientation to God's future. See Ellis, *Gathering*, 71-99. Ellis concurs with McClendon's assertion that the "presiding conviction" in Christina worship is the belief that Jesus is Lord. See Ellis, *Gathering*, 229-232.

McClendon appealed to literary resources in his search for convictions in the lives of exemplary Christians and engagement with high culture. Ellis moved closer to the visible church and everyday religion by consulting historical records and quantitative research data from within a specific denominational tradition. "Living with Jesus" employs ethnography, the detailed study of a concrete culture, to garner the convictions embedded in the practices of worship and mission in two contemporary Baptist congregations and in the ordinary lives of people who belong to them.

The theological method utilized in "Living with Jesus" proceeds in four stages:

- Discover. The first step in applying McClendon's theological method to concrete examples of lived religion is to listen to the collective stories of congregations and the personal stories of individual believers, observe the congregational practices of worship and mission and learn how individual believers practice faith, and be attentive to the material objects created and utilized by people of faith. The tools of ethnographic inquiry help the practical theologian describe and make sense of the accounts, activities, and artefacts of Christian faith.
- Distil: The second step in extending McClendon's theological method to the realm of lived religion is to identify the enduring beliefs or convictions at the heart of the communal life of a congregation and the everyday lives of believers, which are embedded in the accounts, activities, and artifacts of faith. To become aware of embedded beliefs can result in a process of reflection and

deliberate construction of modified or new beliefs.[56] The move from embedded to deliberative theology is, in effect, a move from story to doctrine.

- Dialogue: The third step in appropriating McClendon's theological method to the unsystematic and often untidy reality of a congregation and daily life of a believer is to place lived theology (congregational theology and everyday theology) in dialogue with academic theology.
- Direct: The fourth step in extending McClendon's theological method to lived religion is to direct questions to the congregations and individuals studied that prompt reflection in the light of the Gospel to develop strategic proposals to enhance faithfulness to the Gospel in the convictions and practices central to the communal life and witness of the congregations and the everyday lives of individual Christians that participated in the research for "Living with Jesus".

Christological Convictions

In "Living with Jesus" McClendon's key christological convictions function as a series of lenses to view and reflect upon the understandings of Jesus Christ embedded in congregational practices and the everyday lives of ordinary believers. A summary and evaluation of McClendon's christology supplies a framework for the critical analysis of empirical data to follow.

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[56] Experiences of loss and threats to emotional wellbeing are capable of precipitating awareness of the beliefs embedded, sometimes unconsciously, in our lives. See Carrie Doehring, *The Practice of Pastoral Care: A Postmodern Approach* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 112-118. Awareness of embedded beliefs can also be precipitated by the kind of ethnographic inquiry central to "Living with Jesus" (an academic project) or intentional strategies of pastoral care. See Mary Clark Moschella, *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice: An Introduction* (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 2008), 3-24.

Christological Questions

McClendon's approach to christology is guided by three questions related to the identity of Jesus Christ, which are repeatedly addressed by Christian thinkers in the course of the church's history. First, what right does Jesus have to absolute Lordship? On what basis does Jesus claim our obedience to him? Second, how can monotheists tell the Jesus story? Another way of asking this question is: how can Christians assert that God is uniquely present and active in Jesus Christ? The second question is interested in establishing the nature of the relation between God and Jesus Christ. Third, how Christ-like are the lives of his followers to be? Is growth in Christ-like character required and possible? Some answer that there is no way the ethical quality of Jesus' life can be matched or exceeded, and so the best perspective is one of detached reverence rather than any attempt at aspiring to be like Jesus Christ. Others think that Jesus exhibited a character of life that his disciples are called to imitate. In practice, McClendon argues, the church has tended to neglect the third question. The Anabaptist and Baptist traditions within the church, however, are noted for their interest in living under the rule of Christ and growing in Christ-like character of life. Hence, McClendon's instinct as a self-confessed "baptist" is not to ignore the final question but to encourage readers to pursue it. *Systematic Theology* is designed to help readers reflect upon and evaluate their Christian discipleship and make changes where necessary.

"Living with Jesus" investigates the extent to which the questions posed by McClendon shape the congregational theology and everyday theology operative in the

two Baptist churches studied. Do Christians in these churches shape christologies in response to McClendon's questions? How will McClendon's understanding of Jesus Christ, expressed in *Systematic Theology*, inform and be informed, by an ethnographic inquiry into two Baptist congregations? A brief review of McClendon's convictions about Jesus Christ will lay the foundations for this exploration of lived christology.

Jesus Proclaimed the Kingdom of God

McClendon anchors his understanding of Jesus' teaching ministry to the eschatological theme of the kingdom of God, which is explicit in the Synoptic Gospels. He traces the history of the concept of the kingdom of God in broad brushstrokes through church history. To begin with the kingdom of God (rule of God) has rarely served as a foundational category in Christian doctrine. Neglected in the construction of doctrine for centuries, biblical scholars in the nineteenth century began to recognize the centrality of the kingdom of God in Jesus' teaching. It had often simply been identified with the church, the Christian community. Modern New Testament scholarship began to appreciate that the kingdom of God in the teaching of Jesus pointed to the future and referred to a reality distinct from the church. For McClendon, the kingdom of God is the starting point in *Systematic Theology* precisely because it is at the heart of Jesus' teaching and ministry. He understands the kingdom of God to be a biblical picture that refers to the end times. Jesus, according to McClendon, adds three elements to the concept of the kingdom of God. First, the arrival of the kingdom of God is not relegated to the future. The presence of the rule

of God was "at hand" (Mark 1:15), which means it can be entered and experienced now. Second, the character of the kingdom of God is demonstrated in the life of Jesus who shows the love of God for people and requires people to love one another. The love characteristic of the kingdom of God even extends to love of enemies (Matthew 5:1-12, 43-48). Third, the kingdom of God entails a cost in the face of human resistance to the love of God. Faithfulness to the rule of God results in death on a cross for Jesus. His followers can expect no less.

Jesus is the Measure of Sin

Jesus proclaimed the kingdom of God. In McClendon's estimation this was, "Good news: God's rule here and now overtakes human existence!"[57] The advent of the kingdom of God is an admission that salvation is not something earned by human endeavor. The new perspective on life, new relations, and new way of being made accessible to human life through Jesus Christ are gifts of grace. The kingdom of God points to the priority of grace as the proper context for understanding human sin (rebellion against God). Only an encounter with grace exposes the true extent of sin in human existence. Thus, sin must be seen in the light of the salvation ushered into the world with Jesus Christ. Three conclusions follow in McClendon's understanding of Jesus in relation to human sin. First, Jesus is the measure of sin. He lived a life fully faithful to God. "By his faithfulness he unveils sin: Sin is whatever falls short of, whatever, denies, whatever misses the way of faithfulness to God's rule embodied

[57] McClendon, *Doctrine*, 122.

in Jesus Christ."[58] McClendon is ambivalent towards the concept of original sin, which in many respects he believes to be based on misunderstandings of Scripture. The doctrine has some use in expressing the primacy of grace, recognizing the broad extent of sin, and challenging rival worldviews with deficient notions of human nature. McClendon restates sin in three ways. First, sin is a refusal to receive the new way made known and available to human beings in Jesus Christ.[59] Second, sin is rupture in relations with God and fellow human beings.[60] Third, sin is reversion away from the new vision of life displayed in Jesus Christ.[61] Jesus, as depicted in the Gospels, is the measure of sin in McClendon's christology and inevitably begs the question: how far does congregational christology and everyday christology look to Jesus as the pattern of life to emulate and against which our lives are to be compared and tested?

The Saving Work of Jesus Christ

McClendon observes that the message of the cross did not appear to make a credible case for Christianity in the world of the first century. "The founder, Jesus, had died what ancient people considered a contemptible death as a criminal."[62] Over time the church's teaching on the atonement assumed three broad streams of

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[58] McClendon, *Doctrine*, 124.

[59] Ibid., 130-132.

[60] Ibid., 132-133.

[61] Ibid., 133-135.

[62] Ibid., 198.

interpretation. First, the "classic" type associated particularly with Greek thought interprets the cross as the defeat of Satan and the powers of evil opposed to God. Second, the Latin view of the cross assumes that the predicament created by the power and consequence of sin is a condition from which human beings cannot extricate themselves. God alone can satisfy the "debt" of sin and he does so through the death of Jesus Christ. Third, the moral view assumes that the cross effects a change in human nature. The love of Christ for us expressed on the cross evokes a kindred love in those who experience it. McClendon likens the historic atonement theories to Midrashim (rabbinic interpretations of Scripture). Just as Jewish rabbis adopted considerable freedom to interpret Scripture in ways consonant with particular cultural settings, so the early church interpreted the cross of Jesus Christ in many and varied ways to communicate the Christian story to changing contexts.

McClendon makes sense of the cross by returning to the constitutive story of the Christian faith. Scripture tells "a story of electing love"[63] in which Israel is blessed in order to be a blessing to all nations. "Israel is to be a go-between nation, God's missionary to all the earth."[64] Israel's history exhibits a tension between its divine commission and the nation's repeated disobedience. The prophetic tradition frequently challenged abuses of power and reminded the people that they were called to live under the rule of God. In the New Testament, the Gospels link the ministry of Jesus with the rule of God. (Mark 1:15). "Jesus fought a war of myths. … to

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[63] McClendon, *Doctrine*, 233.

[64] Ibid., 234.

establish once more … the new rule of God."[65] The rule of God entails the forgiveness of sins, the healing of hurts, and the overturning of injustice, whether perpetrated by military power (Rome) or religious power (Jerusalem). Although military and religious powers conspired to put Jesus on a cross, his death was not the end of the story. God raised Jesus from the dead. The executioners did not have the final word and the disciples ultimately returned to follow the One that they had fled from in the Garden of Gethsemane.

Elements of all three historic interpretations of the cross are present in the biblical story of Jesus. The cross of Jesus is directed towards satanic evil. Jesus opposed "the representatives of oppressive government, social conformity, and mendacious religion."[66] The story of Jesus satisfies God because it is God's own story. "What Jesus does in our place is not merely what God requires but what God does, what God suffers."[67] Finally, Jesus' action makes a difference to human lives. His death on the cross transforms "disciples from observers to participants – from men and women who admire Jesus to women and men who follow him."[68]

Encountering Jesus Christ in the Practices of the Church

McClendon's basic premise, and a theme that permeates all three volumes of *Systematic Theology*, is that the church confronts Jesus the risen Christ in the

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[65] McClendon, *Doctrine*, 235.

[66] Ibid., 236.

[67] Ibid., 237.

[68] Ibid.

practices of the Christian faith.[69] The presence of the risen Christ is encountered in four connected practices: common worship, kingdom work, evangelical witness, and hearing the biblical word. Disciples of Jesus Christ meet with the risen Lord when they worship together. It matters not what form worship takes. Encounter is the substance of worship. McClendon appeals to the Scriptural text foundational to the concept of the Gathered Church. "For where two or three meet together in my name, I am there" (Matthew 18:20). Thus, places of divine worship are appropriately called meeting rooms or meeting places rather than sanctuaries.

Christ is also present in kingdom work (acts of mercy and compassion) and witness according to the promise of Scripture. Followers of Jesus live in the light of His promise "I will be with you always" (Matthew 28:19-20). They serve Him when they are compassionate "unto the least of these" (Matthew 25:40). Christians work and witness for Christ with the sense that they do so aided by his presence. Martyrs for Christ from Stephen in the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 7:54-60) to the sixteenth century Anabaptist Dirk Willems testify to the presence of Christ with them in their sufferings. Scripture is a common thread in Christian worship, work, and witness. In listening to the word Christians meet the Word, in hearing the story of Scripture that testifies to Jesus Christ Christians actually meet with him.

[69] A point also made by McClendon in relation to the four steps towards growth in Christian discipleship, each associated with a particular practice, that he outlines earlier in *Doctrine*.

The Risen One (Jesus Christ) and the Corporate Life of the Church

The risen Christ knows us in our worship and work, as well as through witness and word. Knowing Christ is a social phenomenon rather than a solitary experience. The risen Christ becomes manifest in the context of social relations within the church. In the New Testament key words highlighting the corporate nature of the Christian life include "fellowship" (koinonia) and "congregation" (ecclesia). Significantly, when Paul declares that, "Christ is in you, the hope of glory" (Colossians 1:27) he is referring to the corporate body of believers. The English "you", so often assumed to refer to an individual, is in fact plural in the Greek. In the New Testament the "body of Christ" refers not to an individual, but describes a corporate community of believers. The risen Christ is present in the midst of a congregation (Matthew 18:20). McClendon, as noted previously, advocates a form of Christ mysticism premised on the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth from the dead, which is experienced within the social relations characteristic of the Christian community's life and witness.

The Resurrection and the Identity of Jesus Christ

The resurrection is of critical importance to McClendon's christology and determines the meaning of Christ's identity. Jesus Christ is alive. There is no other way of knowing him. McClendon begins his exploration of resurrection's meaning with reference to the appearances of the risen Jesus. He notes that the disciples in encountering Jesus after Easter experienced themselves dealing with God. The disciples are filled with awe, confused, and perplexed. They sense the divine presence in the strange events that follow Easter. The appearances of the risen Jesus

pointed the disciples to the future and the promised gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:1-11), but they also signaled continuity with the past. Disciples recognize the identity of Jesus of Nazareth in the Risen One. The resurrection, then, makes encounter with God, the gift of the Holy Spirit, and the formation of the church possible. In the Gospels it is clear that the disciples were surprised by the resurrection and confused, because an event scheduled for the end of time took place in the middle of history. Yet, when the disciples eventually realized what had happened their outlook was changed forever. No mere resuscitation of a dead body can adequately account for the apostolic testimony.

The New Testament writers understood the resurrection of Jesus from the dead to be an act of God. What did it mean? McClendon gives a narrative interpretation. The resurrection is God's way of identifying his history with the history of the man Jesus of Nazareth:

> I answer that *this was an act of God in time, reversing history's judgment as represented by the authorities, by the opponents, even by the hapless friends of Jesus. All these read history's judgment to be death to this one. The resurrection opposed that judgment by entering God's own judgment; life, Life to this same one. God reversed all human judgment by identifying the life of Jesus of Nazareth afresh with God's own life, so that from that time, and in accordance with an eternal purpose of God, the history of this man, Jesus of Nazareth, was counted identical with God's inner history, in such a way that in knowing of Jesus Christ God could be truly known*.[70]

God who knows us and cares for us is free to identify us as his children afresh. Such a possibility forms part of the Christian hope. Two features make Jesus unique. First, God's identification with Jesus occurs in the middle of time. The rest of us

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[70] McClendon, *Doctrine*, 247. Italics appear in the original text.

must await a general resurrection. Second, Jesus is not identified as merely one of God's children. He is raised to new life as the one who shares in God's story for us, "*the whole story of Jesus is God's own story*."[71] In the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, the life of God becomes one with the life of Jesus. The story of Jesus, including his death, is absorbed into the life of God.

McClendon is convinced that his notion of the story of Jesus and the story of God converging in the event of the resurrection is consistent with the witness of the New Testament, especially the Prologue in the Gospel of John and Paul's epistle to the Romans. Paul declares that Christ Jesus was "proclaimed Son of God by an act of power that raised him from the dead" (Romans 1:4). In the resurrection, God designated a new and supreme status to Jesus Christ. All Christian grace and mission depend upon what God granted to Jesus Christ in the resurrection. McClendon is keen to refute any charges that he espouses an adoptionist christology, which posits a human Jesus raised to divinity. His solution is to affirm that the identification of the story of Jesus with the story of God was always part of the eternal purposes of God.[72]

The resurrection vindicates Jesus as the Christ, vindicates God as the Lord of history, and anticipates the vindication of the world through faith in the crucified and risen One. Christ's resurrection from the dead is an eschatological event in the middle of time that declares God's ultimate purposes for the created order. The

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[71] McClendon, *Doctrine*, 248. Italics appear in the original text.

[72] Ibid.

resurrection permits the believer "a window on the end of the story."[73] The empty tomb, the appearances of the risen Jesus, the emergence of the Christian movement, and the presence of Jesus with his people today are witnesses to the resurrection event. McClendon interprets the empty tomb and the resurrection body of Christ as "condescensions" or "accommodations" on God's part. God freely chose ways and means to encounter human beings suited to our capacities, language, and thought forms.

McClendon's christology begins with the risen presence of Jesus encountered by Christian believers in the life and witness of the Christian community rather than inquiry into Jesus as an historical figure.[74] The Risen One that meets believers in their contemporary experience is divine.[75] Indeed, the creedal formulations issued by the Councils of Nicaea and Chalcedon correctly acknowledged the deity of the risen Christ. "Hence, the very substance of God could be encountered in Christian practice and worship."[76] McClendon, in common with authors in the Anabaptist tradition, is critical of the way in which the creeds neglect the earthly ministry and teaching of Jesus.[77] McClendon questions the Alexandrian notion that the eternal Son formed Jesus' person. According to McClendon, such a concept undermines the true

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[73] McClendon, *Doctrine*, 249.

[74] Ibid., 239-240.

[75] Ibid., 240-242.

[76] Ibid., 253.

[77] Ibid., 253-257.

humanity of Jesus. He concludes that the earlier models of christology are too tied to the cultural contexts they were formed in to communicate meaningfully with the present age. Furthermore, they are all so different that they cannot be integrated together. Therefore, it is necessary to forge a new model suitable for the present situation. McClendon assumes that modern Western culture is transitioning to a postmodern condition and requires a new paradigm to communicate the significance of Jesus Christ to the contemporary world. McClendon's solution is to propose a narrative model of christology.

McClendon begins his journey towards a narrative christology by restating the three christological questions central to the church's reflection upon the person and place of Jesus Christ as demands that must be met by the teaching church. First, "A teaching church must teach the Lordship of Christ."[78] Second, "A teaching church must teach the unity of God."[79] Third, "A teaching church must teach the authenticity of life in Christ."[80] McClendon's object is to formulate an understanding of the person of Jesus Christ that is faithful to the Biblical witness and intelligible within a North American cultural context on the threshold of the twenty-first century. A plethora of contemporary christologies compete for attention. All signal, in McClendon's estimation, that preserving the old orthodoxies is an insufficient approach to comprehending the identity and sustaining the centrality of Jesus Christ.

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[78] McClendon, *Doctrine*, 263.

[79] Ibid..

[80] Ibid.

"That remains a creative theological task in this (and every) generation."[81] In this outlook McClendon echoes the efforts of the liberal theologians he is seeking to move beyond. Furthermore, McClendon tends to assert that the earlier models are unsatisfactory for contemporary purposes rather than making careful arguments for his claim.

McClendon poses the question, "A narrative model for Christology?"[82] He begins his story with a revisionist reading of Philippians 2:5-11 that identifies the image of God in Christ not as a heavenly pre-existence, but as the human situation in the context of Jesus' earthly ministry.[83] Jesus' refusal to grasp equality with God refers not to a divine being refusing to rebel, but to a human being refusing to yield to temptation. Hence, from McClendon's perspective, unlike much traditional Christian interpretation of Philippians 2:5-11, Paul is not intimating some kind of preexistence to the personal centre of Jesus Christ. It is not a reference to the Son of God, the second person of the Trinity, co-existent with the Father and the Holy Spirit from eternity.[84] Such a concept is not found in this so-called hymn to Christ and represents

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[81] McClendon, *Doctrine*, 265.

[82] Ibid.

[83] McClendon's case depends upon his exegesis of Philippians 2:5-11. His exegetical conclusions correspond in large measure with James Dunn's claim that earliest christology did not mention pre-existence, but started with the resurrection of Jesus from the dead to Lordship, a pattern expressed in the kerygma or message preached by the church (Acts 2:31-36 and Romans 1:3-4). See James D. G. Dunn, *Christology in the Making* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1980), 33-46.

[84] For a more traditional reading of Philippians 2:5-11 see Ralph P. Martin, "Some Reflections on New Testament Hymns," in *Christ the Lord: Studies in Christology presented to Donald Guthrie*, ed. Harold H. Rowdon (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1982). Interestingly, Simon Cathercole has recently restated the case for the preexistence of the Son being present in the Synoptic Gospels. See

an anachronism, a reading of a later idea back into the thought world of the New Testament. Paul is talking about the character of discipleship. The key theme in Philippians 2:5-11 is not a myth about heavenly descent; it fuses the earthly ministry of Jesus and his claims to Lordship. The "image of God" in Scripture is not a description of ontological reality, but a task set to be realized. Jesus lived as a human being is supposed to live in relation to God and fellow human beings. He pursued the servant way. Consequently God raised Jesus and exalted him. McClendon believes the summary of the Jesus story contained in Philippians 2:5-11 parallels the account of the Jesus story in Mark's Gospel. What is the basis of Jesus' claim to authority? The New Testament answers this question with reference to the origins of Jesus and his resurrection from the dead.

The origins McClendon sees as important, then, do not depend on a virginal birth. The birth narratives in Matthew and Luke supply genealogies for Jesus and speak of his conception by the Holy Spirit (Matthew 1:20 and Luke 1:35), which implies a virginal conception, but McClendon points out that the birth narratives do not say or imply that Jesus is divine by virtue of his remarkable conception. "A human event is understood to have been a divine action."[85] Neither do the birth narratives suggest that Jesus' conception apart from normal sexual relations accounts for his sinless life. The notion that sin is transmitted biologically arose much later.

Simon J. Cathercole, *The Preexistent Son: Recovering the Christologies of Matthew, Mark, and Luke* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2006).

[85] McClendon, *Doctrine*, 270.

The concept of a virginal conception is not then a test of Christian orthodoxy. "The virginal conception is *instead a sign* of faith for the faithful … of what is signified by the sign, namely, *the full presence of God in the story of Jesus*."[86] The birth narratives should be viewed as valuable but subsidiary parts of the biblical story.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead is, for McClendon, the decisive element in the biblical story. Indeed, the resurrection "is *itself* God's great historic act creating that new presence among us."[87] The birth narratives find their meaning only against the backdrop of the resurrection. Without the resurrection there would be no Gospel story. Since Jesus Christ was raised from the dead it is possible for us to know him. The Gospel is good news for us. Indeed, the resurrection "is nothing less than God's *(re)identification of the entire earthly story of Jesus Christ, from conception to its last breath, with God's own immortal life*."[88] McClendon vigorously refutes any claim that he is expressing a form of adoptionism, the belief that divine sonship is a reward reserved by God for the human being who first complied with God's requirements and that Jesus was the one to make the grade. Such a view would imply that Jesus was the author of his own salvation and, effectively, represent a merit theology contrary to the notion of grace:

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[86] McClendon, *Doctrine*, 270.

[87] Ibid., 271.

[88] Ibid.

> In any case, it must be affirmed here that there was never a time when God did not intend to raise Jesus from the dead, never a time when the whole story pointed to anything less than the ultimate exaltation of the One who was God's self-giving presence.[89]

Thomas Finger's analysis of McClendon's christology is correct when he observes that McClendon's Jesus is "most fully identified with God through resurrection."[90] McClendon, in effect, denies "preexistence to Jesus' personal center"[91]. In view of the biblical witness to God as eternal in nature and the creator of the universe, Finger questions whether any human life, which begins at conception "no matter how fully indwelt by, united with or foreordained by God"[92] can really be regarded as God. Furthermore, if Jesus becomes most fully identified with God in the resurrection, his life and death can hardly be regarded "as God's true coming."[93] Although genuinely illuminating, McClendon's christology runs aground, because his narrative solution does not resolve the ontological implications of claiming Jesus is God with us.

Earliest Christianity is the continuation of the Jesus story. The missionary expansion of the church and planting of congregations signify the presence of the Risen One. Core practices of the apostolic church celebrate and proclaim encounter

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[89] McClendon, *Doctrine*, 272.

[90] Thomas N. Finger, *A Contemporary Anabaptist Theology: Biblical, Historical, Constructive* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 402.

[91] Ibid.

[92] Ibid., 412.

[93] Ibid.

with Jesus the risen Christ. Two further elements of apostolic witness strike McClendon as significant. First the epistles of the New Testament refuse to identify Jesus as a "sinner". McClendon interprets this claim positively. Jesus of Nazareth was completely faithful to God. This faithfulness revealed the unique nature of his relation to God. Second, a range of titles is applied to the Risen One in his earthly ministry. These titles were mostly derived from the Old Testament and reinterpreted to make sense of the person of Jesus Christ. In the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus uses the self-designation "Son of Man" (*huios tou anthropou)* most of all. McClendon renders this term as "Truly Human One" and interprets it as a collective term that applies to both Jesus and his followers. The title "Son of God" does not denote a divine being, but means "chosen of God". Biblical titles for Jesus do not exclude the possibility of appropriating new ones as the church engages with new contexts. However, any new proposals must be consistent with the apostolic witness that proclaims Jesus is the Christ. The apostolic witness signals that in meeting the Risen One, Jesus of Nazareth, the earliest Christians encountered God. The Christian story was an extension of the story that was centered on Jesus Christ.[94]

The Resurrection and Two-Narrative Christology

The biblical and post-biblical story whose centre is Jesus of Nazareth is concerned with two stories. The first story is that of God and his action, a story that begins with Genesis, proceeds through God's redemption of Israel in the Exodus, and

[94] McClendon, *Doctrine*, 274.

comes to a focus in Jesus of Nazareth. All through the story reaching out and reaching down to human beings in a self-giving way is characteristic of God. McClendon agrees with P.T. Forsyth[95] that this story can be summed up as "*kenosis*"; it is a story with a self-giving God at its centre.[96]

The second story is that of the human response to God. It begins with Adam and Eve trying to evade God in the Garden of Eden and continues with Moses who leads the people of Israel out of captivity. Jesus of Nazareth embodies a faithful response to God. McClendon designates this second story the "*plerosis*" or divine fulfillment in human life.

The existence of two stories implies not simply a distinction between Creator and created, Redeemer and redeemed, but also "the failure and fragmentation that have been a part of the creature's story."[97] The human story manifests a dark side. Although the human story rebels against God, it also reaches out for God's story. McClendon concurs with Augustine: "our hearts find no peace until they rest in you."[98] In response to those who might see only one story rather than two, McClendon points to the story of Joseph in Genesis 37-50. Joseph's story is both a story of human malice evidenced by brothers who sell one of their own into slavery

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[95] P.T. Forsyth, a prominent British Congregationalist theologian at the turn of the twentieth century advocated a kenotic concept of christology. See P. T. Forsyth, *The Person and Place of Jesus Christ* (London: Independent Press, 1909).

[96] McClendon, *Doctrine*, 275.

[97] Ibid.

[98] Augustine, *Confessions I:I*, trans. R. S. Pine Coffin (London: Penguin, 1961), 21.

and simultaneously a story of God's providence. God was at work in sending Joseph to Egypt (Genesis 45:81). A distinction must be made between God's presence in the Joseph story and the story of Jesus Christ. God is not part of the wickedness of the brothers in the same way that he is part of the forgiveness Joseph bestows upon his brothers:

> Yet for the place of God in Jesus' own story, *no qualifiers are needed*; the action of Jesus is God's action; what Jesus suffers, God suffers. Here the twoness of the story … converges completely, and we see a human story that God will without qualification acknowledge as his own (Rom. 1:1-4).[99]

A narrative approach to christology, according to McClendon, offers a contemporary model that preserves the traditional claim of two-natures christology that humanity and divinity converge in Jesus Christ, but is not trapped by its limitations. "Two-natures Christology has had its day and we need not return to it save as to a monument of what has gone before."[100] The achievements of Athanasius, Basil, and Leonitus are to be honored, but the contemporary theologian must ever return to Scripture to shape Christian convictions.

The biblical story is also two stories: one is about divine self-expression and the other human investment. In Jesus Christ these two stories are now one story. McClendon believes a narrative christology answers the three perennial christological questions adequately for the present age, although he fully expects that another age will find alternative ways of explicating Christ.

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[99] McClendon, *Doctrine*, 276.

[100] Ibid.

Three Questions Answered

First, what right has Jesus to be Lord of all? McClendon answers that God's claim upon our lives meets us in the risen Jesus.[101] Second, how can monotheists tell the Jesus story? McClendon answers that the biblical story is always two stories. The particularity of the biblical story expressed in the Exodus and Jesus Christ must be understood as a summons to service. Divine election is a call to service of others.[102] Third, how Christ-like are disciples to be? McClendon answers that, since Christ legitimately lays claim to absolute Lordship over the lives of his disciples, they are to aspire to perfect discipleship. "It leaves narrative theology at a considerable remove from that complacent churchmanship or culture Christianity that accepts the traditional Christian status-quo as the norm for the teaching church."[103] Christ expects those who follow him to suffer adversity and death. Following Christ entails social radicalism and non-conformity. A life reoriented to Jesus will clash repeatedly with the powers.

Signposts

Before proceeding to outline the history and identities of First Baptist Church in Jamaica Plain and Ruggles Baptist Church (Chapter Four) and report on the christologies embedded in key congregational practices (Chapter Five) and the daily

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[101] McClendon, *Doctrine*, 277.

[102] McClendon echoes Lesslie Newbigin. See Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (London: SPCK, 1989), 80-88.

[103] McClendon, *Doctrine*, 278.

lives of ordinary believers (Chapter Six), there is value in considering what McClendon's theological project might lead an observer of lived religion to expect or anticipate in the empirical findings of a detailed ethnographic study of congregations and individual Christians in the Baptist tradition seeking to follow Jesus Christ. The hunches or signposts indicated do not guarantee that the empirical findings will confirm them. Instead, they suggest clues for the researcher in terms of what to look out for. It is entirely possible that the empirical findings to be reported in subsequent chapters give grounds to question aspects of McClendon's theological project. Three elements of McClendon's project are relevant to the empirical data that follows in subsequent chapters: McClendon's biography and theological method, his five themes of baptist identity, and, finally, his convictions about Jesus Christ.

McClendon's personal biography and the theological method deployed in *Biography as Theology* and *Systematic Theology* make a persuasive case for his claim that the theological imagination is profoundly influenced by personal experience and observation of human society. Context shapes theology. McClendon's peripatetic career as a theological educator, which was precipitated by efforts to be a faithful follower of Jesus Christ, his teaching experience in ecumenical contexts as a Baptist theologian in Disapora, and the transformative impact of reading *The Politics of Jesus* upon his thinking illustrate how experience impacts the theological imagination. McClendon is not unique in this respect since many influential theologians have changed their perspective on Christian life and witness in the light of personal experience and subsequent reflection upon it. His life story and theological method

alert the student of lived religion to be attentive to the theological and non-theological factors operative in shaping the convictions and practices of faith. If personal experience and observation of church and society and subsequent reflection in the light of Christian thought impact the professional theologian, then the same is likely to be true for pastors caring for congregations and the Christians they are called to lead. The challenge is to identify the factors that shape convictions and practices.

McClendon's portrait of baptist identity suggests five themes are likely to be prominent in Baptist life and witness. These themes are Biblicism, Liberty, Discipleship, Community, and Mission. Since, Baptist congregation and individual believers, according to McClendon, take Scripture as the normative guide for the Christian life, the Scriptural witness to the story of Jesus Christ figures prominently in shaping Baptist convictions. How is Jesus Christ perceived and interpreted by Baptist Christians as they read the pages of Scripture? What lenses are deployed to make sense of the Jesus story? Second, liberty to respond in trust and obedience to the Gospel is a key conviction among Baptists. Authentic faith is freely chosen and not coerced by any human agency. Yet, there is no doubt that Jesus Christ requires congregations and individuals to choose. The concept of choice or decision for Jesus Christ, not simply in the process of conversion but also in the on-going journey of Christian faith, should, in McClendon's pattern of baptist identity, be very important to the congregations and individual studied in "Living with Jesus". What factors inform any choices or decisions that are made? How does Jesus Christ figure in decision-making? Third, Christian discipleship is possible, according to

McClendon's notion of baptist identity, only if the Risen One (Jesus Christ) is present and active in the personal and social dimensions of the Christian life, which implies that Baptist Christians are likely to manifest a strong sense of the presence of Jesus Christ in both individual and congregational experience. Fourth, baptist identity affirms that the Christian life is communal. Hence, a corporate sense of witness in congregational life and the daily lives of ordinary believers is an anticipated ingredient of Baptist churches, along with a commitment to mutual aid and service. Fifth, mission is a priority for baptists. Evidence of witness to Jesus Christ and a willingness to suffer for him and his message are expected to be prominent features in the visible church and everyday religion of Baptist Christians. "Living with Jesus" sets out to discover to what extent McClendon's outline of baptist identity corresponds to the perspectives on Christian faith actually present at First Baptist Church in Jamaica Plain and Ruggles Baptist Church.

McClendon's three christological questions and his positive convictions about Jesus Christ equip the researcher interested in lived religion among Baptists with some antennae to probe empirical data. How do the expressions of lived religion encountered at First Baptist Church in Jamaica Plain and Ruggles Baptist Church answer the christological questions McClendon detects surfacing repeatedly in the history of Christianity? What responses emerge from the data gathered through participant observation?

Finally, McClendon's five christological convictions are of particular note. First, McClendon concludes that the kingdom of God (rule of God) was central to the

ministry of Jesus. Do the congregational and everyday christologies unearthed in "Living with Jesus" concur or place the emphasis elsewhere? What do ordinary believers make of the kingdom of God? Second, McClendon views the saving work of Jesus upon the cross that is described in the New Testament as multifaceted. Is the significance of the cross within congregational practices and daily lives richly textured or compressed into one theory? Third, the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth from the dead is foundational to McClendon's understanding of Jesus Christ. How is the resurrection of Jesus construed in congregational life and the daily lives of ordinary believers? Fourth, McClendon claims a close link between the Risen One and the corporate life of the church. Is there any sense that ordinary believers encounter the risen Christ in the corporate practices of the church? Are they conscious of encountering Jesus Christ in other contexts? Fifth, McClendon perceives the convergence of divine and human narratives in the person of Jesus Christ. He affirms the presence and power of God in Jesus Christ, but implicitly denies any preexistence to the personal centre of Jesus Christ. Do his conclusions resonate with congregational and everyday understandings of the identity of Jesus Christ? Is Jesus Christ viewed as truly human and truly divine in an absolutist sense or a modest sense?[104] What challenges to McClendon's convictions about Jesus Christ are posed by the empirical research into congregational and everyday christologies described in "Living with Jesus"?

[104] See the discussion about the "modest" and "absolutist" distinction between christologies developed by Wesley J. Wildman in "Living with Jesus", Chapter Two pages 118-122.

Equipped with a summary of Jesus Christ in the theology of James McClendon, it is now possible to proceed with an overview of the histories and identities of First Baptist Church in Jamaica Plain and Ruggles Baptist Church (Chapter Four), a survey of christology in their corporate practices of worship and mission (Chapter Five), and an exploration of everyday christologies in the lives of ordinary believers (Chapter Six). Finally, the key christological themes that emerge from the data (Chapters Five and Six) will be placed in dialogue with McClendon's christology to generate insights and questions for First Baptist Church in Jamaica Plain and Ruggles Baptist Church (Chapter Seven) to evaluate the convictions and practices of faith operative in the everyday existence of ordinary believers and the corporate worship and mission of each congregation.

CHAPTER FOUR

VARIETIES OF BAPTIST IN BOSTON

Despite our aspirations, congregations are not timeless havens of congenial views or values. By congregating, human beings are implicated in a plot, in a corporate historicity that links us to a specific past, that thickens and unfolds a particular present, and that holds out a future open to transformation.[1]

Introduction

In order to understand the identities and ministries of First Baptist Church in Jamaica Plain and Ruggles Baptist Church it is important to recognize that each has experienced significant triumphs and tragedies in the course of its history, each is led by a pastor with a distinct history that is brought into the situation, and, finally, each is located in a particular community.

Both churches trace their origins to an upsurge in church planting and numerical growth among Baptists in nineteenth century Boston. Their membership rolls expanded rapidly, evangelistic and social action ministries multiplied, and places of worship were erected to house thriving congregations and to act as bases for mission and ministry. Over the course of one hundred and fifty years these congregations witnessed fire destroy their houses of worship on more than one occasion. Following World War Two they experienced significant decline in membership and congregational programs, and at the start of the twenty-first century were searching for a new lease on life. The ethnic

[1] James F. Hopewell, *Congregation: Story and Structure* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1987), 160.

compositions of First Baptist and Ruggles are changing and both congregations are making a transition from being all white to becoming multiethnic communities of faith.

First Baptist and Ruggles stand in the same denominational tradition, American Baptist Churches (USA), and in the early part of their histories shared a similar evangelical theology and ethos. However, they have taken different paths in the last two decades. Theologically, First Baptist identifies itself as liberal and progressive, while Ruggles sees itself as conservative and evangelical. First Baptist practices a traditional American Protestant pattern of worship accompanied by choir and organ. Ruggles sings contemporary Christian songs associated with charismatic renewal set to modern musical idioms. First Baptist has occupied its present location for almost its entire history and is conscious of its Baptist identity. Ruggles is physically removed from where it was based for most of its history and is more aware of fitting into a pan-evangelical identity than owning a particular denominational loyalty. First Baptist views the social, economic, and political system in the Untied States as seriously flawed. Ruggles regards the ills of modern America as the consequence of society departing from Judeo-Christian principles.

First Baptist Church in Jamaica Plain

Jamaica Plain is a neighborhood located in South West Boston. In the early decades of the nineteenth century it was little more than a village on the outskirts of the city. Several members of neighboring Baptist churches banded together in 1840

to establish a new congregation in the locality of Jamaica Plain.[2] The village hall was opened up for worship in December the same year and the services of a preacher were obtained. People came to faith and were baptized. Eventually, steps were taken to formally organize a church with the support and blessing of adjacent Baptist churches in 1842, which culminated with a public service held at the Unitarian meeting-house in August, recognizing the establishment of the new church and incorporating fifty-nine charter (founding) members. First Baptist immediately started work to secure a permanent home for the congregation. As a result of the church's labors a house of worship was erected and eventually dedicated in October 1843, but building related debt was not repaid until1854-55.

First Baptist experienced a major setback on Friday September 26, 1856, when a fire destroyed the church building. With the assistance of local Unitarian and mainstream Christian churches in Jamaica Plain, First Baptist sustained its weekly services, and soon set about the task of building a new house of worship. A decision was made to relocate and occupy its present address at the intersection of Centre Street and Myrtle Street, and a new Gothic style building was eventually dedicated in August 1859.

Several short-term ministries filled the pulpit at First Baptist in the first two decades of its life and witness. In January 1863 the church was, once again, seeking to appoint a new pastor. A divinity student from the Theological Seminary in

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[2] First Baptist Church in Jamaica Plain, *A Brief History of the Jamaica-Plain Baptist Church of West Roxbury; with the Declaration of Faith, the Church Covenant, and a List of the Members* (Boston, MA: Rand, Avery, & Frye, 1871), 3.

Newton[3] supplied the pulpit on the second Sunday in the first month of the New Year. His name was Adoniram Judson Gordon.[4] He was invited to preach again. Impressed by the young divinity student, First Baptist issued a call to Gordon to become its pastor. He accepted the invitation, completed his studies, and was duly ordained and inducted to the church on June 25, 1863. Gordon arrived to a congregation that had experienced steady growth in numerical strength and vitality. Yet, the congregation was once more burdened by substantial debt to the value of seventeen thousand dollars. Gordon led the church in a major initiative to clear its financial liabilities. Vigorous efforts commenced in 1864 and the entire amount was finally paid off in April 1868. Members of First Baptist anticipated a season of stability and growth unencumbered by the burden and worries of carrying a debt. Good grounds existed for thinking the future looked bright. Throughout Gordon's energetic ministry in Jamaica Plain people committed their lives to Jesus Christ, were baptized, and added to the church. First Baptist was blessed with unprecedented growth. The local Baptist press carried enthusiastic reports about Gordon's preaching and the remarkable increase within the congregation. Gordon's ministry soon began to attract the attention of prominent urban Baptist churches. Clarendon Baptist Church in Boston attempted to persuade Gordon to leave Jamaica Plain and assume its prestigious pulpit as early as 1867. He initially declined. However, Clarendon

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[3] Now Andover Newton Theological School. See www.ants.edu.

[4] A. J. Gordon would become a prominent figure in North Atlantic Evangelical circles. See Scott M. Gibson, *A. J. Gordon: American Premillennialist* (Lanham: University Press of America, 2001).

Baptist Church persisted in its pursuit of Gordon, much to the annoyance of the members at First Baptist, and renewed its invitation to him in 1869. He tendered his resignation in August of the same year. The members at First Baptist pleaded with Gordon to remain, but he stood firm in his resolve to move to Clarendon Baptist Church. Reluctantly, First Baptist accepted his resignation.

The first stirrings of a social conscience at First Baptist can be traced to the middle of the nineteenth century. In August 1844 First Baptist signalled its disapproval of Baptists in the South that supported slavery and advocated a split from them in a letter to the American Baptist Home Mission Society, which, at the time, functioned as a national organization uniting Baptists across the United States.[5] A year later Southern Baptist churches decided to separate from the American Baptist Home Mission Society and established the Southern Baptist Convention. The theme of social justice would be revived at the start of the twenty-first century.

In summary, the early years of First Baptist's history were marked by steady growth in numbers and organizational vitality, cordial ecumenical relations with the local Unitarian society and churches belonging to mainstream Christian denominations, the exacting challenge of recovering from the destructive consequences of fire, the task of raising money and consequent incurring of debt to rebuild, an awakening of social conscience, and, finally, the loss of a capable and

[5] David Taber, "JP: History: Church Safe a Treasure Trove of Local History," *Jamaica Plain Gazette* (Boston) 14 August, 2008; available from http://www.jamiacplaingazette.com/node/2936; Internet; accessed 7 July 2010.

gifted pastor. Several of these themes resurfaced in the subsequent history of the church.

The church continued to make an impression on its immediate locality in the first decades of the twentieth century. Through the years of the Great Depression, First Baptist served as a social center and source of relief to many in Jamaica Plain. The church celebrated its centenary in 1942 at the height of World War Two. Membership in the 1940s numbered approximately four hundred with the church organizing three thriving Sunday schools: primary, intermediate, and adult classes.

From the 1950s onwards the membership and number of people attending Sunday services declined sharply. First Baptist called the Reverend Arnold G. "Bud" Hawkins to the pastorate in 1958. He initiated a new era of ecumenical cooperation. Under his leadership, First Baptist, for more than thirty years, hosted, a three-hour service on Good Friday based on the seven last words of Jesus from the cross as recorded in the Four Gospels. Protestant and Catholic clergy participated in the service.

A second major fire caused considerable damage to the church premises in 1975, necessitating major repairs to the building and restoration of an historic organ. Recovery from the impact of this episode on the congregation and the finances of the church was slow and painful. In the years immediately following the fire a Thrift Shop was opened. This initiative functioned as the main point of contact between the congregation and the community over the next two decades. The Thrift Shop grew like the proverbial acorn into a mighty oak. From modest beginnings in a small room

it spread to occupy almost every square foot of the large basement beneath the church building. Volunteers drawn from the membership and local community ran First Baptist's Thrift Shop. Patrons of the Thrift Shop did not, as a general rule, increase attendance at Sunday morning worship.[6] However, the venture generated significant income that accrued incrementally, and would ultimately enable the church to rebuild and renovate the premises following the fire in 1975. Money issuing from the Thrift Shop also paid for running expenses and major projects, including renovation of the parsonage, renewal of the stucco exterior of the church, and the installation of a new church kitchen in 2003 and 2004. The remaining capital was used to defray substantial budget deficits from 2003 to 2006.

A striking feature of First Baptist's history is the openness to "others" that adhere to different interpretations of Jesus Christ and key Christian doctrines. The fraternal relations established with local Unitarians in Jamaica Plain from the outset of the church's existence to the present day is remarkable, because significant doctrinal differences separate Unitarians and Baptists. For example, Unitarians deny the deity of Jesus Christ and the doctrine of the Trinity, whereas Baptists affirm these doctrines. Yet, Unitarians and Baptists share a common interest in the life, teaching, and example of Jesus Christ that transcends the limits of doctrinal affirmation.[7] The

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[6] On occasion, the practical operations of the Thrift Shop overshadowed the religious identity of First Baptist Church as a community of faith. Entrance to the Thrift Shop was gained through the front doors of the church building. One Easter a sign was posted, with reference to the Thrift Shop, on the main entrance to the church building. It read, "Closed for Holy Week."

[7] Heman Lincoln, pastor of First Baptist (1853-1858), preached a sermon before a joint meeting of Unitarians and Baptists. See Heman Lincoln, *Doing Good: A Sermon Preached Before the Unitarian and Baptist Congregations of Jamaica Plain, on Fast Day, April 5, 1855* (Boston: Gould and

story of Jesus occupies a central place of importance, although it is read through different hermeneutical lenses. The Good Friday ecumenical services introduced by Reverend Hawkins gathered Protestant and Catholic clergy together to meditate on the seven final words of Jesus from the cross recorded in the Gospels in an era when Christian denominations were more aware of doctrinal distinctions. The openness to "others" and centrality of the story of Jesus apparent in First Baptist Church's history anticipated and prepared the ground for the introduction of an enlarged concept of inclusivity in 2006 grounded in the welcome Jesus Christ is perceived to extend to all.

The Challenge of Adapting to a Changing Community

On the eve of the New Millennium, Reverend Hawkins retired. He completed forty-one years of service in the pastorate at First Baptist (1958-1999). The church appointed an interim pastor, Dr Rich Robison (1999-2003), who helped the church think about its future direction and lead the church into the twenty-first century. For the best part of twenty-five years, a committed but aging membership worked hard to recover from the setback of the fire in 1975. Energy was focused inwards on renovating the building, sustaining Sunday worship, and expanding the Thrift Shop. Consequently, the church struggled to proactively engage with the community on its doorstep in ways that enabled congregational growth. Furthermore, the community in Jamaica Plain was changing. First Baptist struggled to adapt to its new social

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Lincoln, 1855). The sermon was based on Acts 10:37 and depicted Jesus as the supreme embodiment of the Biblical commands to love God and one's neighbor. Jesus went about doing practical good to set people free from the oppression of evil. His goal in life and example are an inspiration to imitate him.

environment. Members became increasingly alarmed at the diminishing number of people in the congregation on Sunday mornings. Attendance at Sunday worship shrank to a mere handful of the faithful. First Baptist faced a stark set of alternatives; reverse precipitous decline or face extinction.

The American Baptist Churches of Massachusetts (TABCOM)

First Baptist was not the only historic American Baptist Churches (USA) congregation in Massachusetts at the beginning of the new century struggling to survive and contemplating an uncertain future.[8] The American Baptist Churches of Massachusetts (TABCOM), the regional association for American Baptist Churches (USA) in Massachusetts, proposed a way forward. To assist churches in need of stimulus and fresh vision TABCOM advanced the concept of a Redevelopment Covenant: a partnership between TABCOM, a local church, and a pastor, which focused all three parties on mission and entailed defined commitments for an agreed period of time. A partner church is required to invest resources in a full-time pastoral appointment and agrees to release its pastor to engage in mission for a substantial portion of available ministry time. The Search Committee at First Baptist was introduced to Ashlee Wiest-Laird, an ordained American Baptist Churches (USA)

[8] Total and Resident memberships for TABCOM in the period 1983-2004 consistently moved downward. Resident membership slipped from 40,041 in 1983 to 33,513 in 2004. The average morning attendance from 1983 to 1999 inclusive was 16,886. In 2000 and for the next five years the figure increased to 26022. Chester L. Smith, "American Baptists in Massachusetts: A Statistical Review," *American Baptist Quarterly* 25, no. 4 (2006): 381-401. First Baptist Church in Jamaica Plain reflects the broad trends experienced by the American Baptist Churches (USA) in Massachusetts in the period 1983-1999. It continued in downward arc until 2003 and then reversed upwards in 2004 and 2005.

minister based in Seattle, as a potential candidate for the pastorate. The church warmed to Wiest-Laird's passion, energy, and conviction, and offered the pastorate to her. She accepted the challenge of working to revive a dying congregation and agreed to an initial three-year appointment. TABCOM committed to supporting First Baptist and its new pastor by means of regular monitoring of the situation and consultation meetings with both partners. The Area Minister, Dr. Liliana DaValle, made periodic visits to Fist Baptist from 2003-2006 to offer teaching, evaluation, and encouragement.

Ashlee Wiest-Laird

Pastors play a critical role in shaping the culture of a congregation. "As clergy preach, lead worship, teach, and counsel, they draw on beliefs, symbols, stories, and practices from the Christian tradition to construct narratives and interpretative frameworks that help members locate themselves and find meaning and perspective for dealing with issues in their daily lives."[9] It is important to understand the personal history of a pastor, because it informs her theological imagination, which, in turn, influences the congregational theology expressed in the corporate ecclesial practices of worship and mission. Appreciating the personal history of a pastor includes understanding his or her perspective on Jesus Christ.

Ashlee Wiest-Laird is in her early forties. A native of Louisville, Kentucky, Wiest-Laird experienced several Southern Baptist churches in her youth as a

[9] Jackson W. Carroll, *God's Potters: Pastoral Leadership and the Shaping of Congregations* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2006), 26.

consequence of her family moving back and forth between Kentucky and Florida. In the 1980s she studied religion and sociology at Wake Forest University, North Carolina. Wake Forest University[10] proved to be an enriching experience that, she believes, enlarged her understanding of the Bible and Christianity. Academic studies were not the only formative influence upon Wiest-Laird during this period in her life. She got involved with the Baptist Student Union at Wake Forest University, which had a campus minister who combined spirituality and social activism. He introduced Wiest-Laird and other students to the writings of such authors as Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Richard Forster. These books were read and discussed in small covenant groups. Wiest-Laird began to reach the conclusion that the biblical witness to the kingdom of God and the love of Jesus has implications for the whole of society.

Wiest-Laird had sensed a call to pastoral ministry in her teenage years before setting out for college at a time when ordained female pastors were rare in the Southern Baptist Convention. She recalls never hearing or encountering a female pastor in her experience of Southern Baptist life prior to attending Wake Forest University. Wiest-Laird pursued her sense of call to pastoral ministry and embarked upon a program of graduate theological education at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, Kentucky, earning a Master of Divinity degree in 1991. Subsequent to her studies at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary Wiest-Laird served for four years as the Southern Baptist chaplain at Harvard University. She then spent a year living on the West Bank working with the Sabeel Ecumenical

[10] Wake Forest University is historically a Baptist institution.

Liberation Theology Center, Jerusalem,[11] and the Middle East Council of Churches in Jerusalem, enabling tourists to meet local people and leading workshops to educate visitors about current political realities in Israel.[12]

On returning to the United States, Wiest-Laird gained standing as an ordained minister with The American Baptist Churches in Massachusetts and served as an interim pastor at Alston. She completed a Master of Sacred Theology degree in religion and society at Andover Newton Theological School in 1998. The next port of call in her ministry experience was as an associate pastor on staff at First Baptist Church in Seattle,[13] from where she was called to be pastor at First Baptist Church in Jamaica Plain in September 2003.

Ashlee Wiest-Laird: Biographical Christology

The christology embodied in Wiest-Laird's life and ministry at First Baptist exhibits continuities and discontinuities with her earliest understanding and experience of Jesus Christ.[14] She grew up in a Southern Baptist home environment

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[11] Information about the Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Centre can be viewed at its website: www.sabeel.org.

[12] Ashlee Wiest-Laird's husband, Lance also lived on the West Bank in 1995-1996 to undertake fieldwork for his doctoral dissertation at Harvard University. His dissertation is a study of shared symbols among Christians and Muslims on the West Bank. One image he explores is Jesus as a Palestinian Revolutionary Martyr. Lance Daniel Laird, *Martyrs, Heroes and Saints: Shared Symbols of Muslims and Christians in Palestinian Society* (Th. D. diss., Harvard University, 1998).

[13] First Baptist Church in Seattle is one of the six West Coast liberal Protestant congregations profiled in James Wellman, "Religion Without a Net: Strictness in the Religious Practices of West Coast Liberal Christian Congregations," *Review of Religious Research* 44, no. 2 (2002): 184-199.

[14] The transition in christological perspective evident in Ashlee Wiest-Laird is echoed in several members at First Baptist Church.

that stressed the love of Jesus for all people; in her mind Jesus has always been about showing human beings the love of God. Through Wiest-Laird's childhood and youth the appropriate response to the love of Jesus, expressed in his death on the cross for the forgiveness of sins, was to give one's heart and life to him as Savior and Lord. A personal decision to follow Jesus Christ entailed baptism on profession of faith and the cultivation of a life of devotion characterized by attendance at regular church activities (worship services and youth events), participation in mission trips, and personal Bible reading and prayer. Christian discipleship was principally about service in the church and making choices that affected one's personal morality and spirituality.[15]

Wiest-Laird's time at Wake Forest University introduced her to historical, literary, and contextual readings of Scripture, which located Jesus in a concrete time and place, exposed her to alternative versions of Christian spirituality, and expanded her notion of God's love to include a social justice dimension. Jesus continued to be the one that showed people the love of God, but the scope of God's love was expanded in light of the kingdom of God, a divine reality that transforms relations between people. The category of personal sin was not abandoned, but it was now viewed against a background of systemic injustice. Wiest-Laird's awareness of injustice in church and society was accentuated through personal encounters on mission projects with Christians from different cultures and people of other faiths, firsthand experiences in local congregations, the change in educational culture she

[15] Wiest-Laird shares a common Southern Baptist culture with James McClendon.

observed at seminary during the years of Fundamentalist and Moderate conflict in the Southern Baptist Convention,[16] and difficulties in being recognized and affirmed as a female pastor in the Southern Baptist Convention.

For Wiest-Laird, Jesus remains fundamentally someone that compels a person and a congregation to choose. His proclamation of the kingdom of God requires individual Christians and congregations to work for justice and peace, to transform those factors in society that oppress and spoil human life. Jesus confronts individual believers and communities of faith to decide between the kingdom of God or the powers opposed to the character and purposes of God.

The story of Jesus is more important to Wiest-Laird than doctrinal precision about the person and work of Jesus.[17] What matters is the difference that Jesus makes to the way you live your life, not so much what you believe to be true about Jesus. Hence, the cross is viewed primarily as the outcome of a life lived in obedience to God; it is a warning about the cost of discipleship and an example that stirs a self-giving attitude in those who would follow Jesus. Wiest-Laird is wary of "transactional" theories of atonement or interpretations of the cross that construe it simply as an event used by God to effect an objective change in relations between God and human beings. Too often, in her view, such notions of the cross are held cognitively without any apparent alteration in attitude or lifestyle.

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[16] For a description and evaluation of what happened in the Southern Baptist Convention in the 1970s and 1980s see Nancy Tatom Ammerman, *Baptist Battles: Social and Religious Conflict in the Southern Baptist Convention* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1990).

[17] Wiest-Laird employs stories and a story-telling style in her preaching.

The resurrection and the presence of the risen Jesus to Christians and in the world are the most important components of Wiest-Laird's personal faith and public message. These convictions spring from Wiest-Laird's personal experience and understanding of the Bible, and serve as the basis for hope in working for change here and now. Although the resurrection and the presence of the risen Jesus are strongly affirmed, Wiest-Laird feels no compulsion to be precise about the nature of the resurrection event and Jesus' risen presence in her preaching and teaching. She is adamant, however, that the resurrection signifies God's vindication of Jesus and guarantees that God's love will ultimately prevail.

McClendon posits three dimensions to a conviction: cognitive (what is believed to be true), volitional (how if influences the will), and affective (the impact upon human sensibilities). Wiest-Laird's beliefs about Jesus can be parsed into McClendon's multifaceted approach to convictions. Cognitively, the life, teaching, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ show us God's love in a unique and unrivalled way. His proclamation of the kingdom of God invites human beings to relate to one another and to God differently. Jesus is welcoming and hospitable to all. The cross is the result of obedience to God and calls us to the same costly pattern of life and service. Finally, the resurrection of Jesus from the dead is the source and sign of Christian hope. Volitionally, the teaching, example, and personal presence of Jesus confront people to make a choice. The heart of the Christian life is about choosing the path most consistent with the mind of Christ, who in his person exemplifies the radical inclusive love of God and a new way of relating between people that embraces

justice, peace, and reconciliation. For Wiest-Laird, what is believed to be true about Jesus must be translated into how a person or congregation lives. Affectively, the Christian life is characterized by the presence of Jesus. His presence mediates hope, comfort, guidance, inspiration, and courage to continue as his disciple. To follow Jesus as his disciple is also to be accompanied by him on the way. The risen Jesus can be encountered in the corporate worship of the church, service to others, the wonder of the natural world, and spiritual and secular practices. He has a habit of turning up in people and places that surprise and challenge our assumptions.

Preserving a Legacy, Creating a Future: Defining Expectations

At the first Redevelopment Covenant Meeting on October 8, 2003 pastor and congregation established their respective expectations of each other. It was agreed that fifty percent of the pastor's time be devoted to pastoral care within the congregation and fifty percent to outreach into the local community. The church mandated Wiest-Laird "to shake us up, generate new ideas, encourage participation, be visible, build relationships, promote spiritual well-being, offer counselling, reach out."[18] In return, the pastor expected "honest feedback, presence & participation, communication, open-minds, stewardship, prayer, partnership and perspective."[19] A series of discussions entitled "Envisioning Our Future" ran in the Adult Christian Education Class on Sunday mornings through December 2003. The pastor reported a

[18] Ashlee Wiest-Laird, "Reflections from Pastor Ashlee," *The First Baptist Church in Jamaica Plain* 1, no. 2 (November 2003): 2.

[19] Ibid.

summary of the conclusions reached in the January 2004 edition of the monthly newsletter:

> We agreed that our basic strength is that we are a multi-cultural community that welcomes all kinds of people and all kinds of families. We would like to continue building on this solid foundation of "many cultures, one faith." We hope, as well, to grow in our worship, study, and ministry opportunities. We want to reach out to our community with our resources, our building, our programs. The thrift shop is a vital part of who we are – we would like to be better connected to the folks who come through the doors everyday. Ecumenical relationships, international connections and respect for other religious traditions are all important to us. We would like to provide a safe, healthy, place for all children.[20]

The congregation numbered approximately fifteen to twenty people when Ashlee Wiest-Laird arrived. Within six months attendance at Sunday worship had tripled.[21] By the end of 2004 between sixty and seventy people, young and old, were worshipping at First Baptist Church on a Sunday morning. Unfortunately, events beyond the control of pastor and people interrupted the encouraging signs of new life breaking out in the congregation. History repeated itself on January 18, 2005. Fire swept through the Gothic structure of First Baptist Church in Jamaica Plain destroying the sanctuary and causing significant damage to rooms in the wing adjacent to the main building. The wing, steeple, and outside walls, remarkably, survived the blaze.

The First Unitarian Universalist Church in Jamaica Plain immediately offered hospitality to their Baptist neighbours. For the next twelve months First Baptist held

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[20] Ashlee Wiest-Laird, "Reflections from Pastor Ashlee," *The First Baptist Church in Jamaica Plain* 2, no. 1 (January 2004): 2.

[21] Heather Hawkins, Linda Karpeichick, and Martha Khan, "Thoughts from the Pastoral Relations Committee," *First Baptist Church in Jamaica Plain* 2, no. 3 (March 2004): 3.

Sunday services at the local Unitarian house of worship. In the meantime, the congregation began to pursue an insurance claim and develop plans to restore the devastated church building. Both endeavors encountered significant obstacles and it became clear that exile from the ruined premises could last for several years. The congregation decided it was vital to re-establish a visible presence on Centre Street to signal its continuing existence and maintain a tangible witness to the Gospel. Two trailers were hired to provide a meeting space, parish office, and bathroom facilities. The new meeting place sat on the church green, which is located between the church's house of worship burnt to a shell by fire, and the sidewalk on Centre Street; it was accessible by steps and a ramp. Banners, artwork, and a notice board adorned the outside of the building. Several charred timbers were laid at the base of the trailer unit to remind passers by of the fire.

Once again, a catastrophic fire influenced the story of First Baptist at a critical moment in its history, as it was seeking to recover from years of numerical decline and organizational inertia.[22] The fire confronted the congregation and individual members with important questions. Is it right for the congregation as a community of faith to continue seeking a new lease on life in the wake of such a serious blow? Did individuals want to continue investing time and energy in a cause that overnight became even more challenging? What does it mean to follow Jesus Christ in this particular set of circumstances?

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[22] A short video documenting the challenge faced by the church in the wake of the fire in 2005 is available on YouTube: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PuoXE1IxDyo.

Jamaica Plain Today

The ravaged shell of the house of worship that has been home to First Baptist Church in Jamaica Plain for most of its history is a short distance from the shores of Jamaica Pond and occupies a prominent position on Centre Street at the intersection with Myrtle Street.[23] Jamaica Plain is about four miles from the centre of Boston. A Post Office stands opposite the church's property on the corner of Myrtle Street. Both sides of Centre Street west of First Baptist are lined with shops and places to eat. Local residents can choose from a JP Licks ice cream shop, several fast food outlets, and a handful of chic restaurants. The immediate vicinity is peppered with small galleries and specialist shops. Houses and apartment blocks stand on either side of Centre Street east. Many buildings in the vicinity of First Baptist appear a little worse for wear externally, but signs of gentrification are apparent in the care taken with internal decoration. Centre Street is a busy road, a major artery carrying traffic to and from the centre of Boston. A bus stop is located on the sidewalk adjacent to First Baptist's temporary trailer.

In the 1980s low rents attracted many students associated with Northeastern University and the School of the Museum of Fine Arts. A lesbian and gay community also took up residence in Jamaica Plain as the decade progressed. The growing presence of an artistic community resulted in the opening of local galleries and bookshops. First time buyers were able to afford property prices in Jamaica Plain and contributed to revitalization of the area through the 1990s. In addition, non-profit

[23] Centre Street used to be the post road from Boston to Providence. The Anglicized spelling ("centre" rather than "center") is a residual reminder of Boston's colonial past.

housing groups purchased rundown houses and vacant lots to create affordable accommodation. By the turn of the Millennium Jamaica Plain had attracted a large constituency of college-educated professionals, political activists, and artists. Today Jamaica Plain also hosts a significant population of medical professionals.

As of the 2000 Census, the racial, ethnic, and economic diversity of this neighborhood could be seen in the numbers. Whites constitute the largest racial group (61.6%), but both African American and Latino populations are present in greater numbers than is typical of the U.S. population. Black or African American residents represent 15.7% of the population and Hispanic or Latino persons (of any race) account for almost a quarter (24.9% compared to a national count of 12.5%). 20.9% of the population were born outside of the U.S. (twice the national average) and 34.7% of the population spoke a language other than English at home.

A large proportion of the population in Jamaica Plain is highly educated. In 2000 some 46.8% of the residents in Jamaica Plain had earned a Bachelor's degree or higher qualification compared to the national average of 24.4%. A wide range of economic circumstances is also present in this neighborhood. Median household income ($46,492) was higher than the U.S. national median level ($41,994). The median family income ($50,604) was fractionally higher than the national median family income ($50.046). Yet, the families below the poverty level (12.8%) in Jamaica Plain exceeded the national level (9.2%).

The percentage of renter-occupied housing units (60.1%) dwarfed the proportion of owner-occupied units (39.9%). The median value of a single-family

owner-occupied home was $276,500. Jamaica Plain is a neighborhood of contrasting economic realities and increasing ethnic diversity.

Table 2: The racial profile of the population in Jamaica Plain (Zip Code 02130)

Race	Percent	U.S.
White	61.6	75.1
Black or African American	15.7	12.3
American Indian and Alaska Native	0.5	0.9
Asian	5.2	3.6
Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander	0.0	0.1
Some other race	12.3	5.5
Two or more races	4.7	2.4
Hispanic or Latino (of any race)	24.9	12.5

Table 3: The social characteristics of Jamaica Plain (Zip Code 02130)

Social Characteristic	Percent	U.S.
High school graduate or higher	82.2	80.4
Bachelor's degree or higher	46.8	24.4
Foreign Born	20.9	11.1
Speak a language other than English at home	34.7	17.9

Table 4: Economic Characteristics of Jamaica Plain (Zip Code 02130)

Economic Characteristic	Percent	U.S.
Median household income In 1999 (dollars)	46,592	41,994
Median family income in 1999 (dollars)	50,604	50.046
Per capita income in 1999 (dollars)	25,700	21,567
Families below poverty level	12.8	9.2
Individuals below poverty level	16.5	12.4

Profile of a Congregation

The congregation of First Baptist Church in Jamaica Plain increasingly reflects the multiethnic profile of the neighborhood and includes African American, Haitian, Caucasian, Hispanic and Asian parishioners. A large proportion of the congregation I got to know in 2006 had joined since Ashlee Wiest-Laird became pastor in 2003. Many of the new members come from Southern Baptist or Roman Catholic backgrounds.[24] They find an understanding of Jesus Christ and Christian discipleship in the preaching and teaching at First Baptist that fits with the way they view God and their aspirations for life. The multiethnic profile of the congregation resonates with their vision of what the church as a community of faith is meant to be like. Ashlee Wiest-Laird is one of the most cited reasons for people joining and

[24] First Baptist Church in Jamaica Plain is not alone among Protestant congregations in Boston in attracting former Catholics. Park Street Church, a prominent evangelical congregation in central Boston, reports a similar phenomenon. See Rob Moll, "Boston's Quiet Revival," *Christianity Today* 50, no. 4 (2006): 22.

staying at First Baptist Church. Her commitment to working for a better quality of life for people in Jamaica Plain, spirit of encouragement, desire to be welcoming and inclusive of all people, and the way she links these priorities to Jesus Christ are very compelling and attractive qualities to a lot of the newer recruits at First Baptist.

Three broad people groups constitute the majority of the congregation at First Baptist Church in Jamaica Plain. The largest piece of the congregational mosaic is white, but that segment includes two very different generations. A core of elderly members connects the congregation to its living history, stretching back over the last fifty years of the twentieth century, and its denominational identity as part of American Baptist Churches (USA). By 2003 this generation had shrunk to a faithful remnant seeking a new lease on life for the church it cared about. This core group of members was instrumental in choosing to invest the resources of the church in a full-time ministry to pursue congregational growth and calling Ashlee Wiest-Laird to the pastorate at First Baptist Church in Jamaica Plain. The majority are cradle Baptists, grew up at First Baptist, played active roles in the congregation through young adulthood and middle age, and continue to do so in their senior years, although many no longer live in Jamaica Plain. Several occupy key positions, for example, the offices of moderator and treasurer, in the congregation. The cradle Baptists are supplemented by elderly long-time residents in Jamaica Plain that drifted into the church via the Thrift Shop or occasional pastoral contacts.

The other generation - educated white professionals in their twenties and thirties, several with young families - make up a significant and growing element of

the congregation. This younger generation of white adults is drawn from a variety of denominational backgrounds. Most identify Southern Baptist Convention or Roman Catholic roots. They are attracted to First Baptist by the vision of Christianity articulated by Ashlee Wiest-Laird and embodied in the congregation. The central message proclaimed by Wiest-Laird is one of radical inclusiveness centred on Jesus Christ that increasingly finds expression in the multiethnic and multigenerational profile of the congregation. This commitment to radical inclusiveness and Christ-centeredness, which is key to the congregational theology at First Baptist, fits the description Liberal-Evangelical advocated by Wesley Wildman and Stephen Garner. "Liberal-evangelical churches build their narrative identities around principles of radical inclusiveness and Christ-centeredness."[25] The educated white professionals at First Baptist are people intentionally seeking to embrace diversity in a multiethnic and religiously plural context. First Baptist is home to a small, but growing number of bi-ethnic or "blended" families. The Lairds have adopted two boys with African American heritages.[26] One mixed race couple has also joined the church. The educated white professionals gravitating to First Baptist seem to be looking for a safe context to explore what it means to be Christian in an ecclesial environment that self-consciously questions inherited patterns of thought. First Baptist offers a safe space, a

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[25] Wesley J. Wildman and Stephen Chapin Garner, *Lost in the Middle? Claiming an Inclusive Faith for Christians Who Are Both Liberal and Evangelical* (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2009), 143.

[26] The Lairds tell their story in the World Association for Children and Parents quarterly magazine. See Berneil Juhnke, "Dream in Black and White," *WACAP Today* (Fall 2003): 6-7, 14.

haven,[27] for these believers to experience cultural diversity and rethink what it means to follow Jesus Christ.

Hispanics are the second major piece of the mosaic at First Baptist. Their presence in the congregation reflects a significant demographic change, already noted, that has occurred in Jamaica Plain during the last two decades. Hispanic members are predominantly female and retired. A few are active in campaigning on justice and peace issues in the local community. Baptist and Roman Catholic upbringings are evident in their life stories. The core message of inclusiveness focused on Jesus Christ and the openness to people of all racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds are significant factors in explaining the steady growth in the Hispanic presence at First Baptist. Hispanic members bring into sharp focus the perspective of immigrants born outside the United States who struggle with identity, language, and acceptance within American society. They must daily engage with the complex realities of being strangers in a strange land. The message of a Jesus who welcomes all into his circle of friends and confronts the systemic powers in society that oppress the poor and vulnerable resonates with the experience of Hispanic members. The personal affirmation and encouragement offered by Wiest-Laird has also been a significant factor in attracting them to First Baptist.

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[27] Gerardo Marti's analysis of the multi-ethnic congregation *Mosaic* convincingly argues that it offers people a number of safe havens or spaces to occupy. He identifies five types of haven: Theological, Artistic, Innovative, Age, and Ethnic. The concept of a haven suggests a safe space to inhabit, but also implies something that is being avoided and rejected. An element of self-selection determines the composition of *Mosaic's* congregation. See Gerardo Marti, *A Mosaic of Believers: Diversity and Innovation in a Multiethnic Church* (Bloomington, ID: Indiana University Press, 2005), 4-17.

Black members constitute the third, albeit diverse, identifiable group at First Baptist. African American, Caribbean, and African heritages are represented in this segment of the congregational rainbow. A common theme among black members (all of whom have joined since Ashlee Wiest-Laird arrived) is a desire to be part of a church that models an inclusive multiethnic community of faith. The historic failure of America to be the "Beloved Community" is acknowledged at First Baptist, but the challenge to live into this hope burns brightly.

"Many Cultures, One Faith"

Visitors to First Baptist receive a leaflet explaining its sense of identity: "We are a Christian community of many cultures, one faith! Unified and strengthened by the Holy Spirit, we gather together to glorify God and God's Son, Jesus Christ, by our worship, by the sharing of the gospel, and by service to others."[28] The public culture of the congregation celebrates diversity: economic, ethnic, cultural, and religious. "Many Cultures, One Faith" is displayed on a banner attached to the historic building and a signboard adorning the new trailer. Literature issuing from the church carries the same slogan.

Confessing Baptist Identity

A positive vision of Baptist identity is commended within the life of the congregation. The quarterly Inquirer's Classes for those interested in becoming members always incorporate some explanation of American Baptist Churches (USA).

[28] Welcome Leaflet.

The congregation supports four American Baptist Churches (USA) denominational offerings throughout the calendar year. Ashlee Wiest-Laird accentuates what she sees as the positive elements within the Baptist tradition in her preaching and teaching, such as the traditional Baptist emphasis on the individual making a personal decision to follow Jesus and adopting a lifestyle consistent with a profession of Christian discipleship. Baptists put people on the spot and ask the individual, "So what do you think about Jesus?" Wiest-Laird also stresses the importance of soul-freedom (freedom in matters of religious and ethical conscience) and communal discerning of the mind of Christ in the church meeting.[29] Partly this emphasis on Baptist identity is pragmatic. For example, the church partnered with The American Baptist Churches of Massachusetts and Ashlee Wiest-Laird in a Redevelopment Covenant and accepted training and consultation advice offered by the Regional Minister, Dr. Liliana DaValle. Partly, it is also historic. A sense of Baptist identity is strengthened by the commitment of a core of long-standing members historically raised within the American Baptist Churches (USA) tradition.

A Welcoming and Affirming Congregation

As part of a brief reflection on the season of Advent in December 2003, Wiest-Laird highlighted several grounds for hope in a troubled world. A recent decision by the Massachusetts Supreme Court to permit gay and lesbian couples to

[29] Inquirers interested in discovering more about Baptist identity are offered free copies of Bill J. Leonard, *An Introduction to Baptist Principles* (Brentwood, TN: Baptist History and Heritage Society, 2005).

marry is cited as one reason for hope. Wiest-Laird comments "that the loving God who created us longs for us to be in loving, committed relationships with one another. Allowing homosexual couples to have the same privileges and responsibilities in marriage as heterosexual couples is the right thing to do."[30] One year later, in the Fall of 2004, Wiest-Laird suggested that, in the context of Jamaica Plain, First Baptist needed to be clear as to "whether or not we will indeed be welcoming of our gay and lesbian neighbours."[31] Subsequently, the pastor initiated a conversation about same-sex relationships in First Baptist.

Wiest-Laird acknowledged that Christians are divided over the issue of same-sex relationships and that conflict sometimes results from conversations about this issue. She attributed the diversity of opinions evident among Christians to different ways of reading and interpreting the Bible (hermeneutics).[32] The congregation was invited to participate in a four-week study on reading and interpreting Scripture.[33]

In the April 2005 edition of the church's monthly newsletter, Wiest-Laird returned to the theme of same sex relationships in the context of public controversy over the issue within the First Baptist's denomination, American Baptist Churches (USA). Against the backdrop of these denominational tensions, a group of Baptists

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[30] Ashlee Wiest-Laird, "Reflections from Pastor Ashlee…" *The First Baptist Church in Jamaica Plain* 1, no. 3 (December 2003): 2.

[31] Ashlee Wiest-Laird, "Reflections from Pastor Ashlee…" *The First Baptist Church in Jamaica Plain* 2, no.10 (October, 2004): 2.

[32] Ashlee Wiest-Laird, "Reflections from Pastor Ashlee…" *The First Baptist Church in Jamaica Plain* 2, no.10 (October, 2004): 2.

[33] The topics included an introduction to the Bible, Hebrew Scripture, Christian Scripture, and Issues and Interpretation.

gathered at Rochester to reaffirm historic Baptist principles of freedom and tolerance. The summit issued an affirmation subsequently posted on the Internet. Wiest-Laird informed First Baptist that she had added her name to it and invited them to find out more and add their signatures if they wished.

The following month (May 2005) Lance Laird led an Adult Education Class on Homosexuality and the Bible. "We need to talk. Our congregation includes gay and lesbian members and families of homosexuals. In general, we are known for a passive tolerance toward our fellow members and the large gay population in our community."[34] Laird makes it clear in his article introducing the topic that he is not neutral on this issue, but he aims to create a safe space for different points of view to be expressed. The five week series drew upon *Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth*[35] published by the Alliance of Baptists and the Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America, a compilation of materials derived from Baptist congregations that have already engaged with the topic of same sex relationships.[36]

Reflecting on the American Baptist Churches (USA) Biennial meeting in Denver, Colorado, where tensions within the denomination over homosexuality resurfaced, Wiest-Laird applauded the General Secretary's clarion call to the churches

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[34] Lance Laird, "New Adult Education Class: Homosexuality & the Bible," *First Baptist Church in Jamaica Plain* 3, no. 5 (May 2005): 2.

[35] LeDayne McLeese Polaski and Millard Elland, ed. *Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth: A Resource for Congregations in Dialogue on Sexual Orientation* (Charlotte, NC/Washington DC: Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America/Alliance of Baptists, 2000).

[36] Fred Glennon, "Must a Covenantal Sexual Ethic Be Heterocentric? Insights from Congregations," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 28, no. 3 (Fall 2001): 215-233. The article tells the stories of two Baptist congregations that became Welcoming and Affirming Congregations.

to remain in committed relationship to one another in spite of deep differences. She noted that First Baptist as a church of "many cultures, one faith" echoed this stance and was endeavouring to grasp what it means to walk together in love.

Ashlee Wiest-Laird preached a sermon on discernment in the summer of 2006 and asked the congregation to consider what important decisions lay before the congregation. The topic of inclusivity was mentioned several times, a topic that Wiest-Laird pursued in the next edition of the church's monthly newsletter:

> Are we or are we not an inclusive congregation? I think we are, or at least we are trying to be. But how would those outside of our doors know that they are welcome? Do folks in wheel chairs see that not only is the trailer accessible, but the people inside are too? When do they see it? Do neighbours who primarily speak Spanish feel included in our outreach? Why or why not? Do gay men and lesbians know that our church is a safe and inviting community? How would they know?[37]

Wiest-Laird concludes by expressing the conviction that she believes First Baptist perceives itself to be a "grace-filled" community receptive to all and asks what action the congregation needs to take in order to communicate this "reality" to the residents of Jamaica Plain. Wiest-Laird hopes that responses to such questions would be forthcoming at the congregation's annual meeting on June 18, 2006.

On June 18, 2006, at its annual meeting, First Baptist Church decided that it was a "welcoming and affirming congregation," a community of faith that intentionally invites and welcomes gay men and lesbians. Wiest-Laird interpreted this decision as a statement of identity. "In the midst of rebuilding our church, we

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[37] Ashlee Wiest-Laird, "Pastor's Column," *First Baptist Church in Jamaica Plain* 4, no. 6 (June 2006); 2.

have prophetically spoken about who we are as God's people and we have proclaimed ourselves to be bearers of Christ's inclusive love."[38] Furthermore, First Baptist agreed to join the Association of Welcoming and Affirming Baptists (AWAB) "so that we might be clear and more public about our identity as a church where no one is excluded."[39]

The masthead of the July edition of *First Baptist Church in Jamaica Plain* that reported the outcome of the annual meeting on June 18 carried a new sub title, "A Welcoming & Affirming Congregation." Page three of the July edition contained an advert for "A Great Awakening of Welcoming & Affirming Baptists," a weekend event at the end of July 2006 in Northampton, Massachusetts, sponsored by the Association of Welcoming and Affirming Baptists. The tag line "A Welcoming and Affirming Congregation" was also displayed outside the trailer, incorporated on the church's website, and added to welcome leaflets for visitors and literature issued in the name of First Baptist.

The drive to become "A Welcoming and Affirming Congregation" highlights several features of the public culture that it appears Ashlee Wiest-Laird is attempting to construct at First Baptist Church. First, the congregation is construed as a radically inclusive community of faith open to all. Second, the basis for such broad inclusiveness is the perceived inclusive love of Jesus Christ that welcomes and accepts all types of people. Third, the positioning of First Baptist as "A Welcoming

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[38] Ashlee Wiest-Laird, "Pastor's Column," *First Baptist Church in Jamaica Plain* 4, no. 7 (July 2006): 2.

[39] Ibid.

and Affirming Congregation" is an expression of solidarity with a particular constituency, namely, the gay and lesbian community in an attempt to identify with people often marginalized by church and society. Fourth, the decision made by the annual meeting in response to Wiest-Laird's initiative is designed to shape the missionary presence of First Baptist, to build bridges into the local community, to communicate publicly that it is a safe space for gays and lesbians to step into.

Ruggles Baptist Church

Unitarians erected the house of worship located at the intersection of Audobon Circle, Beacon Street and Park Drive, two blocks west of Kenmore Square. It is a beautiful and impressive red brick edifice capped by a stone spire that exceeds the height of the Statue of Liberty in New York.[40] The spire is a prominent landmark and towers over the immediate neighborhood. Boston University's main hub of administrative buildings, schools, and student facilities on Commonwealth Avenue (Charles River Campus) sits to the northwest, no more than a ten-minute walk from the corner of Beacon Street and Park Drive. Boston University South Campus student housing surrounds the church. Brookline, an affluent quarter of Boston, is close by and Copley Square situated in downtown Boston is two miles away.

In 1970 this house of worship built by Unitarians became a permanent home to Ruggles Street Baptist Church, a congregation originally planted in the nineteenth

[40] The spire is one hundred and fifty seven feet high, six feet taller than the Statue of Liberty in New York. John Nicholls Booth, *The Story of the Second Church in Boston* (Boston, MA: Second Church, 1959), 48.

century and in a different part of Boston.[41] The Third Baptist Church of Roxbury was organized in 1848, just eight years after the Jamaica Plain congregation was begun, both serving Boston's expanding population. The church erected a Meeting House on Ruggles Street in the same year and from 1848 to 1866 the building was knows as Tremont Road Baptist Church. Ownership of this premises changed hands several times in the next few years as various Baptists, lay and ordained, recognized potential in the site. Reverend Daniel C. Eddy initially acquired the property. Although ownership of the building changed hands, Sunday School work continued on the site with occasional preaching services. In 1869-70 the work was organized as a Baptist Mission. Two members of Shawmut Avenue Baptist Church, Mr. Lansing Millis and Mr. Charles B. Lane, purchased the property. At this time Shawmut Baptist Church superintended the Branch Chapel Mission on Washington Street. The Pastor and members of Shawmut Baptist Church viewed the meeting house on Ruggles Street as an ideal base for a new Baptist witness to be formed by amalgamating the two Mission Sunday Schools in its care: the Branch Chapel Mission and Ruggles Street Baptist Mission. This goal came to pass when the two causes were merged in 1869. Reverend Robert G. Seymour had commenced his ministry at the Branch Chapel Mission in February 1869, and it was he that assumed leadership of the new Baptist witness on November 7 of the same year.[42]

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[41] Ruggles Street Baptist Church, *Seventy Years of Service 1870-1940: Ruggles Street Baptist Church* (Roxbury, MA: Ruggles Street Baptist Church, 1940).

[42] Boston annexed Roxbury in 1868.

Ruggles Street Baptist Church was formally organised on July 26, 1870. Thirty people formed the new Baptist congregation under the leadership of Robert Seymour. By 1873 the membership had increased to 181. Yet, despite its rapid growth, the new Baptist cause depended upon financial subsidies to sustain its activities in the first few years of its life and witness. Shawmut Baptist Church gave financial assistance in decreasing amounts in the first years of the new church's life to encourage the new congregation to ultimately become self-supporting. In 1875 the finances of Ruggles Street Baptist Church had advanced sufficiently for the new church to purchase the property it met in from Mr. Lane and Mr. Millis. Articles of Incorporation and a Church Covenant were adopted in 1878 to formally constitute the church. Membership now stood at 422 and the church was sufficiently strong enough to plant a new congregation. Sixteen members were granted letters of dismissal in the same year to organise the German Baptist Church in Jamaica Plain.

In 1874 Robert G. Seymour met Daniel Sharp Ford, a wealthy publisher and philanthropist committed to Gospel preaching and social relief for the working poor in Boston. The efforts of the pastor and people of Ruggles Street Baptist Church, a new but growing church, had come to this attention. Ford invited Seymour to his office to meet him in person and a strong friendship developed between the two men. Consequently, Ford and his family joined Ruggles Street Baptist Church in 1875 and he became a great benefactor to the church. His philanthropy was instrumental in the combination of Fundamentalist and Social Gospel elements that characterized the

church at the end of the nineteenth century.[43] Although some critics suggested that the commitment to social service at Ruggles Street Baptist Church got in the way of the message of personal salvation,[44] the fact remains that Ford's generosity made possible its considerable humanitarian activiites. Remarkably, Ruggles Street Baptist Church employed seventeen paid staff by 1901.[45] The broad range of ministries organized by the church included an employment bureau, an industrial school, a relief department that sent missionaries out into the local neighborhood to identify people in need, and a medical dispensary that incorporated a maternity department, distributing milk for children.

A bequest from Ford of one and a-quarter million dollars generously endowed the Boston Baptist Social Union, a lay organization established in 1864 to support Christian mission (including social relief, education, and evangelism) among working people in Boston. Ford was a founding member of the Boston Baptist Social Union[46] and a central figure in its operation until his death in 1899. A large segment of his endowment was specifically allocated to support the work of Ruggles Street Baptist Church. Daniel Ford included a request in his will to transfer the property owned by

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[43] Margaret Lamberts Bendroth, *Fundamentalists in the City: Conflict and Divisions in Boston's Churches* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 32-33.

[44] Joseph Edwin Harris, "Sin, Satan, and the Social Gospel" *Bibliotheca Sacra* 91, no. 364 (1934): 465-466.

[45] Bendroth, *Fundamentalists in the City*, 32.

[46] The Boston Baptist Social Union is an independent charity that elects its own leaders.

Ruggles Street Baptist Church to the Boston Baptist Social Union.[47] The title of the property owned by Ruggles Street Baptist Church did, indeed, pass to the Boston Baptist Social Union. Ford's foresight and provision meant that the Boston Baptist Social Union supplied significant financial support to Ruggles Street Baptist Church for slightly more than one hundred years, mainly to fund personnel for mission work in Boston, purchase of property, erection of buildings, and property maintenance.[48]

The church building erected in 1848 was enlarged in 1876 and 1877, and new galleries were installed in 1880. Pastor Gabriel Reid Maguire appealed to the Boston Baptist Social Union in 1915 to assist the church in further expanding its facilities, resulting in the addition of a "fireproof" building incorporating an Assembly Hall and Gymnasium. In the course of Gabriel Maguire's ministry (1914-1920) a dispensary was revived (which evolved into New England Baptist Hospital), a day nursery established, and an employment bureau organised, and five people were added to the salaried staff. Towards the end of his tenure many aspects of the church's ministry had to be stopped, owing to an unexpected shortfall in income from a Trust Fund set up by Daniel Ford.[49] Three short-term ministries followed the departure of Gabriel Reid Maguire in 1920.

In summary, several prominent themes stand out in the first fifty years of Ruggles Street Baptist Church. First, the church was active in planting new

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[47] Ruggles, *Seventy Years of Service 1870-1940*, 44.

[48] The Boston Baptist Social Union still operates today. See www.bbsu.org.

[49] The experience of Ruggles Street Baptist Church illustrates the dangers inherent in becoming financially dependent upon the resources of a single individual.

congregations and sponsoring ministries to support new immigrant groups, including Germans, Latvians, and Chinese. Ruggles was not peculiar in employing such a strategy. Protestants and Catholics across Boston did exactly the same thing. Second, the church depended much upon financial subsidy, initially from fellow Baptists in neighboring churches and latterly from the fortune of a wealthy church member, Daniel Ford. Third, the church combined a commitment to preaching for personal salvation and social relief to improve the lives of working people in Boston. Fourth, the church was very aware of its Baptist history and identity.

On July 20, 1925, a fire started in the vicinity of the pulpit and organ, and swept through Ruggles Street Baptist Church. The destruction was so great that the edifice had to be razed to the ground. Temporarily, the church met for worship in the Assembly Hall and Gymnasium. The Reverend James T. Rider, assistant pastor at Tremont Temple, acted as the pulpit supply on November 19, 1926 at the last moment, when the expected preacher was unable to attend. Rider preached two sermons that day and made a deep impact upon his hearers. The church was so impressed by his preaching that they offered him the pastorate. He began his ministry on January 2, 1927 and led the church through a difficult and challenging chapter in its life. Sunday school enrollment and membership both decreased in the wake of the fire and the church was not in a position to employ as many paid staff as in previous years. Once again, Ruggles Street Baptist Church turned for assistance to the Boston Baptist Social Union, which purchased the Swedish Congregationalist church

building that stood opposite the ruined remains of the Baptist house of worship on Ruggles Street; it served as home to the Baptist congregation for the next nine years.

In 1932 a committee was set up to make plans to erect a new house of worship. A plan of action was devised in partnership with the Boston Baptist Social Union. The Boston Baptist Social Union undertook to build a new church auditorium for worship and Ruggles Street Baptist Church agreed to accept responsibility for erecting a chapel and Sunday School rooms. Ground was broken in 1934 and the new church building was eventually dedicated the following year on May 12, 1935.

Seventy Years of Service, an official history of Ruggles Street Baptist Church, released in 1940 records the church membership at the time of publication. The overwhelming majority of the eight hundred members listed on the membership roll resided in Roxbury.[50] But in 1940, Roxbury stood on the threshold of a demographic transformation. The area became the destination of many African Americans migrating from the South to find a new life in Boston in the 1940s and 1950s. African Americans became the majority population in Roxbury in1960 and remain so to the present day. As the African American population grew in Roxbury through the 1950s and 1960s, living conditions steadily deteriorated. The appalling circumstances that many African Americans lived in, which included a lack of basic health care provision, roach infested tenement blocks, inadequate garbage collection, and substandard schools, and the knowledge of gains made by the Civil Rights Movement in the South galvanized a younger generation of African Americans to protest against

[50] Ruggles, *Seventy Years of Service 1870-1940*, 99-114.

the City of Boston's patent neglect of a district overwhelmingly populated by African Americans. Major unrest fermented in Roxbury through the 1960s and riots finally erupted following the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., in 1968.[51]

Historically, Ruggles Street Baptist Church had been an all white congregation based in a predominantly white part of Boston. By 1970, the church had become a white island in a predominantly black quarter of the city. The church found itself confronted with a community in transition where the population had shifted dramatically (it had become black) and living conditions had spiralled downwards. The church opted to relocate from the building it had occupied for thirty-five years. It is ironic that Ruggles should choose to remove itself from Roxbury at a time when its historic pattern of ministry (preaching for personal salvation and social relief) might have assumed a fresh and prophetic relevance in the conditions that prevailed among African Americans in the 1960s.[52] The decision to relocate suggests an inability to cope with ethnic diversity and recognize the need to work for social transformation. A diminishing sense of Baptist identity accompanied the move to Beacon Street.

Ruggles Street Baptist Church made its new home at 874 Beacon Street, since 1914 home to the Second Unitarian Church, Boston. Second Unitarian Church, Boston, merged with First Unitarian Church, Boston, in 197O, making its historic building available for purchase. Ruggles Street Baptist Church acquired the Unitarian

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[51] For a vivid account of the social, economic, and political landscape in Boston in the 1950s and 1960s see Thomas H. O'Conner, *Building a New Boston: The Politics of Urban Renewal, 1950-1970* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1993).

[52] Ruggles operated a food pantry form its basement during the 1990s, but this venture had to close when flooding damaged the premises.

house of worship the same year with the assistance of the Boston Baptist Social Union. The church shifted north and west to find a new location for worship and mission, and dropped "Street" from its public persona on taking up residence in Beacon Street. Today, only one person who was part of the church when it was based in Roxbury, remains on the membership roll and is active in the congregation. Ruggles Baptist Church is disconnected in both geography and memory from its past. Now located in a very different part of Boston, its ties to its living history are limited to the memory of that one remaining person.

Larry Showalter

Larry Showalter is the pastor at Ruggles Baptist Church. Now in his mid fifties, he grew up on a dairy farm in Pennsylvania. His family attended a Church of the Brethren congregation that, as he recalls, taught the Ten Commandments and that Jesus forgives sins. Curiosity about God and the Christian life prompted many questions that he struggled to find satisfactory answers to. As a teenager he came into contact with Youth for Christ, an evangelical youth ministry, in his hometown. He was struck by the way in which the teenagers involved with Youth for Christ talked about faith. They spoke with enthusiasm and excitement. Showalter perceived some kind of reality to be present in their lives that seemed to be absent from his own. His curiosity persisted as he sought to know more about God and experience God. Eventually, he made a decision to follow Jesus Christ as a result of the witness of a Youth for Christ leader in his hometown during the summer between his sophomore and junior years at college. This experience turned out to be a life-changing moment

for Showalter. On returning to college he linked up with Campus Crusade for Christ, an interdenominational evangelical student ministry, which grounded him in Christian doctrine and encouraged him to share his faith with others.[53] Campus Crusade for Christ gave "content", as Showalter puts it, to his experience of becoming a Christian in his hometown.

Showalter's college major was in dairy science, but he sensed God was calling him to strike out in a new direction. On completion of his college degree he joined the staff of Campus Crusade for Christ, which enabled him to concentrate his energies in evangelism and making disciples. He met his future wife at the University of Massachusetts, where both were on staff with Campus Crusade for Christ. Discerning that his future lay in pastoral ministry, Larry Showalter studied theology, earning a Master of Divinity degree from Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary (an interdenominational evangelical seminary) in South Hamilton, Massachusetts. From seminary he accepted a call to the pastorate at Ruggles Baptist Church, Boston in 1981 where he celebrated twenty-five years of ministry in October 2006.

Larry Showalter: Biographical Christology

Larry Showalter's personal search for God and consequent conversion experience constitute the most significant influences in the formation of his christology. His curiosity about God prompted Showalter to seek out answers among

[53] The history and evangelistic method of Campus Crusade for Christ is described and analyzed in Patrick G. McLeod, *An Historical and Theological Analysis of Campus Crusade for Christ's Evangelistic Strategy in Two American University Contexts* (Ph.D. diss. Boston University 2010).

those that he perceived knew God and testified to a reality at work in their lives that he sensed was absent in his own. Hence, he was attracted to teenagers in his hometown involved with Youth for Christ that talked naturally and straightforwardly about God and matters of faith. Ultimately, a Youth for Christ worker led Showalter to the point of making a conscious and intentional decision to become a follower of Jesus Christ.

Still somewhat unclear in his own mind about the step of faith he had taken and what it meant for his life, Showalter, on his return to college, encountered the student ministry Campus Crusade for Christ, an organization that helped him to make sense of his conversion experience, rooted in a search for God, and provided a clear and concise interpretative framework, namely, the Four Spiritual Laws. Bill Bright, the founder of Campus Crusade for Christ, developed the Four Spiritual Laws as a means of summarizing and communicating the Gospel in a clear and coherent manner to students at college. The Four Spiritual Laws are framed on the premise that just as physical laws govern the operation of the universe, so spiritual laws govern human relations with God. According to Bill Bright, the laws that govern relations between God and human beings are:

1. God loves you and offers a wonderful plan for your life.
2. Man is sinful and separated from God. Therefore, he cannot know and experience God's love and plan for his life
3. Jesus Christ is God's only provision for man's sin. Through Him you can know and experience God's love and plan for your life.

4. We must individually receive Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord; then we can know and experience God's love and plan for our lives.[54]

Campus Crusade for Christ taught Showalter the basics of Christianity following his conversion and subsequently employed him to evangelize and make disciples of college students. In so doing Campus Crusade for Christ has decisively shaped Showalter's beliefs about Jesus Christ and Christian discipleship. His basic understanding of Jesus Christ has remained consistent and unchanged over the last three decades. Showalter's perspective is that the theological education he received at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary added substance to his understanding and reinforced his existing beliefs about Jesus Christ.

The Four Spiritual Laws and Showalter's christology focus on the condition of the individual human being before God. Jesus is the solution to the problem of human sin, which separates human beings from God. Thus, Jesus is the key to the individual's relationship to God. The death of Jesus upon the cross makes it possible for human beings to relate to God in the present and safeguards the individual believer's eternal destiny. Jesus makes the difference between enjoying an eternity lived in fellowship with God or suffering an eternity separated from God. He alleviates guilt and enables the individual believer to experience the accepting love of God and so draw near to God. Christology is essentially about repairing relations with God.

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[54] An explanation of the Four Spiritual Laws is posted on the Campus Crusade for Christ website. See http://www.campuscrusade.com/fourlawseng.htm.

For Showalter, the experience of forgiveness translates into an amended way of life in conformity to the teaching and example of Jesus Christ. Relationship with God, acceptance by God, the relieving of guilt, experience of forgiveness, and the realization of God's plan for the individual, all made possible through Jesus Christ, figure prominently in Showalter's christology. Consequently, the person and work of Jesus is worthy of praise. Showalter exudes a genuine and profound sense of gratitude to Jesus Christ for his humility in enduring the cross to accomplish redemption from sin. Although, judgement is a real possibility, Showalter tends to avoid talking about hell, and prefers to emphasize the persistence of God's love in pursuing human beings to relate to them, a love brought to sharp focus in the death of Jesus Christ upon the cross.

Affirming orthodox convictions about God, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit is important to Larry Showalter, because he adheres to a concept of absolute truth grounded in the character and purposes of God. Thus it is necessary to make a distinction between truth and falsehood. Jesus reveals God and so is the arbiter of truth. Showalter affirms the doctrine of the Trinity, virginal conception of Jesus, the Incarnation, Jesus' death on the cross for the forgiveness of sins, and the bodily resurrection of Jesus from the dead. In practice, the New Testament witness to Jesus is interpreted through the lenses of the Four Spiritual Laws and doctrinal theology.

If Showalter's cognitive convictions about Jesus Christ remain essentially unchanged, and the volitional content of his christology continues to be about living to please the risen Jesus, it is apparent that the affective dimension of his christology

and the Christian life has altered with the passage of time. He is, for example, more comfortable living with ambiguity in his life experience today than he was in the early years of his Christian discipleship. Furthermore, although Showalter attests to a sense of the presence of Jesus Christ with him in his individual life, and the knowledge that Jesus accepts him elicits a deep sense of gratitude, he associates the risen Jesus most closely with the experience of a renewed vitality in corporate worship at Ruggles in the 1980s and 1990s. Others within the congregation shared his sense of the presence of the risen Jesus in public worship, in effect, confirming and validating his personal perspective on Jesus Christ.

McClendon's multidimensional concept of a conviction offers a useful basis for analyzing Showalter's beliefs and experience of Jesus Christ. Cognitively, Showalter believes that Jesus' personal center pre-existed as God the Son in eternal communion with God Father and God the Holy Spirit. Furthermore, the Old Testament anticipated the incarnation of the Son as a human being in the virginal conception of Jesus of Nazareth, who was sent by God the Father to be an atoning sacrifice for the forgiveness of sins. Jesus died as a substitute and accepted the proper judgement and penalty of God for sin in our place. Subsequent to Jesus' death on the cross God raised him bodily from the dead. Jesus continues to be present to the experience of the Christian through the empowering presence of the Holy Spirit. Volitionally, the identify of Jesus as God incarnate, the one who saves people from their sins and rules the cosmos calls forth an acknowledgement that he is Savior and Lord. A believer, although forgiven and set free from the power and consequence of

sin, must still wrestle with the reality of sin in his or her life, and so must constantly choose between right and wrong. Choice is a prominent theme in Showalter's christology. The call to conversion means it is important to choose Jesus Christ as one's personal Savior and Lord, and the life of discipleship constantly requires the believer to choose faithfulness and obedience in daily life. Affectively, knowledge of Jesus Christ bestows an experience of peace and assurance. Guilt is assuaged and the believer tastes the persistent love of God that longs to create and renew relationship with God. Gratitude to God for his work of salvation in human experience is a hallmark of the Christian life.

Seasons of Change, Experimentation, and Discernment

The twenty-five years spanned by the ministry of Larry Showalter at Ruggles can be roughly divided into six phases. During the first phase Ruggles witnessed a transition from a traditional to a contemporary style of worship in the 1980s. A "hymn-sandwich" pattern characterized worship at Ruggles when Larry Showalter arrived in 1981. This pattern of worship emerged towards the end of the nineteenth century, but it was almost universal by the middle of the twentieth century in Protestant churches in the United States. Baptists were no exception to this general pattern.[55] Two features characterize this form of liturgy.[56] First, the service is punctuated by congregational singing. Second, the sermon or proclamation of the

[55] Raymond Bailey, "The Changing Face of Baptist Worship," *Review and Expositor* 95, no. 1 (1998): 47-58.

[56] Christopher J. Ellis, *Approaching God: A Guide for Worship Leaders and Worshippers* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2009), 37-39.

Word is normally positioned at the climax of the service. The physical form of the Sanctuary embodied the influence of the Theater upon Protestant ecclesiastical architecture in the nineteenth century. Hence, the seating in a Protestant auditorium consisted of pews set out in rows facing a raised pulpit. Congregants sang from a hymnal accompanied by a pipe organ, and numbers posted on a hymn board announced the songs selected and the order in which they appeared in the service.

A few years into his ministry, in the thick of a season of spiritual dryness, Showalter began to read widely on the meaning and practice of worship. In 1986 the church moved from a traditional to a contemporary style of worship. Contemporary songs accompanied by a music group replaced traditional hymns and the pipe organ. The new pattern of public worship began with a block of worship songs, moved to the sermon, and concluded with a ministry time that offered opportunity to respond to the sermon and seek help through prayer.[57] Indeed, Showalter's own practice of prayer was renewed in the context of seeking a fresh infusion of spiritual vitality in the wake of burning himself out towards the end of the 1980s. The church granted him a four-month sabbatical to rest and recuperate. A short while after returning from his sabbatical Showalter began to meet with a group of pastors weekly to pray. The group organized "concerts of prayer" that gathered together churches in Boston and became the core leadership of the "March for Jesus" initiative in the city.[58]

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[57] Adding or deleting a service and changing the shape of an existing worship service correlates with significant conflict. See David R. Brubaker, *Promise and Peril: Understanding and Managing Change and Conflict in Congregations* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2009), 55-69.

[58] The concept of a "March for Jesus" was imported from London, England. A group of charismatic leaders and the church networks they led organized a praise march around the City of

The second phase coincides with a church-planting project. Ruggles had a history of sponsoring church plants aimed at specific people groups.[59] In 1990 the church launched out in mission to plant a new congregation in the Mission Hill area of Boston, which lies in close proximity to Jamaica Plain, by supporting a group from Ruggles in this venture. The church plant struggled to take root and ultimately merged with another congregation in Mission Hill. Planting a new church out of a congregation with modest resources is an ambitious and demanding task. The attempt to do so exemplifies the commitment at Ruggles to make Jesus Christ known to those who are not yet Christians.

A prominent charismatic movement that flourished in the middle part of 1990s impacted Ruggles and defined the third phase of the church's life in the course of Larry Showalter's ministry. The "Toronto Blessing"[60] provoked major controversy in

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London in May 1987. The object of the march was to declare the name of Jesus in London and announce the defeat of spiritual powers corroding the heart of the capital and the nation. A decision was made to organize more marches and the name "March for Jesus" was adopted. The second march, under the new name "March for Jesus", took place in Westminster in 1988. The initiative was subsequently replicated internationally. See Pete Ward, *Selling Worship: How What We Sing has Changed the Church* (Bletchley, Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2005), 72-74.

[59] Ruggles Street Baptist Church sponsored a German speaking Baptist congregation in Jamaica Plain in the early part of its history and subsequently supported a Latvian Branch and a Chinese Ministry. The Latvian branch of the church listed approximately eighty members. See *Seventy Years of Service*, 115.

[60] Ultimately, the Vineyard Movement expelled the Toronto Airport Church from its membership. The "Toronto Blessing" attracted a lot of scholarly attention. See Martyn Percy, "Adventure and Atrophy in a Charismatic Movement: Returning to the 'Toronto Blessing'," *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 20, no. 1 (2005): 71-90; Margaret M. Paloma, "The 'Toronto Blessing': Charisma, Institutionalization and Revival," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 36, no. 2 (1997): 257-291; Ronald Shouten, "'Rituals of Renewal': The Toronto Blessing as a Ritual Change of Christianity," *Journal of Ritual Studies* 17, no. 2 (2003): 25-34.

individual congregations, historic denominations, and new church networks.[61] It originated at the Toronto Airport Vineyard Church in 1993-94. The experience associated with the Toronto Blessing was first manifested when a visiting Vineyard pastor from the United States, Randy Clark, preached at the Toronto Airport Vineyard Fellowship. People responded by falling (or being slain) in the Spirit and laughing, dancing, barking, and shaking uncontrollably. These phenomena were reported widely in the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom. Larry Showalter and some of the leaders at Ruggles visited the Toronto Airport Church to learn more of what was happening. Disagreement over the nature of the Toronto Blessing and how to respond to it caused conflict within the congregation at Ruggles.

The fourth phase unfolded towards the end of the 1990s, when Ruggles Baptist church adopted the Alpha Course, an evangelism program devised by Holy Trinity Brompton (an evangelical charismatic Anglican church) based in London, England.[62] The Alpha Course presents an overview of the Christian faith in fifteen sessions. Each session begins with a meal, incorporates a talk presented by the course leader or through videos produced by Holy Trinity Brompton, and makes space for asking questions and discussion. The Alpha Course gives a great deal of attention to the person and work of the Holy Spirit, a theme that resonates with what I heard from Larry Showalter and the congregation at Ruggles.[63] Inspired by the potential of Alpha

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[61] Ward, *Selling Worship*, 107-110.

[62] The Toronto Blessing spread to Holy Trinity Brompton. Ward, *Selling Worship*, 110.

[63] Alpha has been subjected to searching criticism. See Stephen Hunt, *The Alpha Enterprise: Evangelism in a Post-Christian Era* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004; Rob Warner, *Reinventing English*

to make Jesus Christ known to people not yet Christians, Ruggles ran three Alpha courses per year in 1997 and 1998. In 1999 the church planned and hosted a conference, attended by 500 delegates, to promote the Alpha Course and provide training in delivering it to churches in New England.[64] Showalter, reflecting on the final years of the 1990s, felt that the time, energy, and resources put into the New England Alpha Conference by Ruggles exhausted the congregation. The willingness on the part of the congregation to invest so much of itself in a conference designed to enable other churches to be more effective in evangelism is interpreted within Ruggles as a sign of its commitment to participate in partnerships that unite like-minded Christians across Boston and New England to advance the kingdom of God. In this view, the kingdom of God is a bigger reality than the church and takes precedence over the church.

The main initiatives in the life of the congregation (adopting a contemporary worship style, planting a church, prayer concerts, March for Jesus, encounter with the Toronto Blessing, and utilizing the Alpha course) apparent in the period 1981-1999 consumed significant time, energy, and resources in the lives of individuals and the congregation collectively. Because worship is the primary expression of a

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Evangelicalism, 1966-2001: A Theological and Sociological Study (Bletchley, Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2007), 115-137.

[64] Critics of the Alpha course point to its unbalanced presentation of the doctrine of God. The Alpha syllabus includes two sessions specifically on the person and work of Jesus. Three sessions are devoted to the Holy Spirit. One session is allocated to the devil. No session is dedicated to God the Father. See Mark Ireland's analysis of "Alpha" in Mike Booker and Mark Ireland, *Evangelism – Which Way Now? An Evaluation of Alpha, Emmaus, Cell Church and Other Contemporary Strategies for Evangelism* (London: Church House Publishing, 2003), 12-32.

congregation's culture,[65] a shift in worship style is a major change in the life of a congregation and likely to court conflict. Similarly, charismatic renewal is a phenomenon that has provoked a great deal of contention in the contemporary church. Ruggles experienced tensions relating to public worship and charismatic renewal. Although many found the change in worship style exhilarating and satisfying, not everybody embraced the new format, songs, and music. Subsequent steps to move the congregation in the direction of intense charismatic worship and to experience phenomena such as falling unconscious and speaking in tongues precipitated further disagreement at Ruggles with the result that some people left the congregation. The leadership of the church responded by taking a step back from adopting a fully-fledged charismatic or overtly Pentecostal identity.

Much time and energy has been spent negotiating the public culture of Ruggles Baptist Church.[66] Two themes in particular recur throughout the period 1981-1999: the pursuit of authentic spirituality or genuine encounter with God (manifested in the preoccupation with vitality in public worship, prayer concerts, and the Toronto Blessing movement of charismatic renewal) and making Jesus Christ known to those who are not yet Christians (expressed in a church planting project, embrace of Alpha, and participation in the March for Jesus in Boston).

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[65] Brubaker, *Promise or Peril,* 55-69.

[66] Penny Edgell Becker, *Congregations in Conflict: Cultural Models of Local Religious Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 49.

Discerning a Vision: A Journey Interrupted (1999-2002)

After almost two decades of difficult experiments, the congregation embarked upon a process of discernment in 1999-2002 to identify God's priorities for the church and look to the future. The discernment process began in 1999, the year of the New England Alpha Conference, and effectively marked the beginning of the fifth phase in the church's immediate past. A basic question guided the church's thinking, "What will capture the heart of this church, creating in us a passion for the Lord and his ministry at Ruggles?" The heart of the church, the answer to the question posed, was summarized under four headings:

1. ***Our Worship*:** There is a heart to worship God at Ruggles. Our worship is moderately to strongly charismatic, attractive to most new believers and unbelievers. Our heart is to express a genuine love for God in worship and to proclaim to the heavenly realm who God is. Sometimes this expression is quiet and meditative, other times this expression is joyous and exuberant. Whatever the expression, it is our desire to worship Him as the Sovereign Lord of lords and King of Kings.
2. ***The Ministry of the Holy Spirit*:** Ruggles is a place that introduces Christians to the ministry of the Holy Spirit. God seems to have given us grace to bring believers into a more intimate walk with God through His Spirit. Although the gifts of the Holy Spirit are present among us, we long for more expression of the gifts, especially in healing and deliverance. It is important for us to continue in faith that expressions of the gifts will increase, yet rejoice in what God has already graced us with now.
3. ***Evangelism/Discipleship*:** We love to see others come to Christ and we have a growing desire for more people to respond to the Gospel. Our desire and burden for the unbelieving, unchurched person to come to Christ is increasing at this time in our history. We are attempting to come to terms with how we disciple new believers. It will come. Our heart's desire is to be ready with the other churches in Boston to receive the lost who will be found by Christ as revival is impressed upon us.
4. ***Unity for the Church*:** There is a special anointing upon Ruggles that moves us to contribute to the unity of the body of Christ in Boston and beyond. Our past and present involvement in city-wide events, sponsoring of New England wide training in evangelism, building

> bridges with Catholic communities and Messianic ministries, and sharing our facilities with other churches are evidences of this calling. We believe God has given us a heart for unity that pleases Him under the theological umbrella of the Apostle's Creed and the Nicene Creed. We have a heart to be part of the answer to the Lord's Prayer for unity in John 17.[67]

The four themes identified as representing the heart of the church found expression in the main initiatives in the life and witness apparent in the church from 1981 to 1999: adopting a contemporary worship style ("Our Worship"), church planting and Alpha ("Evangelism/Discipleship"), prayer concerts and March for Jesus ("Unity for the Church"), and the Toronto Blessing ("The Ministry of the Spirit"). Unfortunately, for Ruggles the journey of discernment was interrupted. Several major pastoral issues proved to be very challenging for the church leaders in the period 1999-2001. A number of relationships were strained, conflict erupted again, and some people decided to move on.

Recovery and Stabilization (2003-2006)

A sixth phase was unfolding at the time I conducted research for "Living with Jesus". The impression I formed in the course of my participation at Ruggles was that of a congregation beginning to emerge out of a difficult chapter in its history, experiencing new signs of life and vitality, and beginning to look to the future once again. Still, a lack of energy remained. For example, from 2003 to 2006, Alpha courses were run only sporadically. The last course, at the time research for this project got under way, was organized in the spring of 2005 with no immediate plans

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[67] Larry Showalter, "Ruggles: The Local Positioning of the Church (Get out your GPS)" *The Beacon Light* (January 2007): 5-6.

to run a new course. Ruggles Baptist Church did work through the *Purpose Driven Life*[68], written by Rick Warren, the senior pastor at Saddleback Community Church in Orange County, California, but the congregation is not planning to repeat the exercise.

A Question of Identity

The four phases of the congregation's recent history from 1981 to 1999 echo broader movements within North American evangelicalism: (a) a shift to a style of worship defined by informality and contemporary music (b) church planting (c) charismatic renewal/Toronto Blessing (d) the Alpha Course. All six phases (including the two later periods of discernment and recovery) consumed much time and energy at Ruggles. Exhilaration and exhaustion kept company with each other in the experience of the congregation, and conflict has been a recurring theme; it is apparent that the church found it difficult to engage with conflict well.

Ruggles is more conscious of an evangelical identity that transcends denominational borders than its historic Baptist identity and affiliations. This emphasis is a self-conscious response to the presence of many denominational backgrounds in the congregation. The interdenominational ethos of the church is evident in two ways. First, the congregation has appropriated aspects of several pan-evangelical movements. Second, people in the congregation interested in pursuing theological education tend to look towards Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, the interdenominational evangelical seminary where Larry Showalter studied, based

[68] Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life: What on Earth am I Here For?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002).

in South Hamilton, which also has a Boston Campus that equips students for urban ministry.

The Baptist history and identity of the church are not stressed in the congregation. Literature from The American Baptist Churches of Massachusetts and American Baptist Churches USA is not displayed. No events or resources associated with these ecclesial bodies are announced or promoted. Indeed, a visitor to Ruggles is hard pressed to learn that the church is affiliated with The American Baptist Churches of Massachusetts and American Baptist Churches (USA). Yet, the Baptist affiliation and history of the church is not totally omitted. An article in the monthly newsletter on the history of the building and present challenges did acknowledge the long-term financial contribution of the Boston Baptist Social Union to the mission and ministry of the congregation. Furthermore, the international student ministry based at the church featured in the November 2006 edition of *The Vine*, the monthly magazine published by The American Baptist Churches of Massachusetts.[69]

Matching an Old Building to Contemporary Worship and Mission

As noted already, 874 Beacon Street was purchased with the assistance of the Boston Baptist Social Union in 1970. The Boston Baptist Social Union met the long-term maintenance costs of the building and spent between three and four hundred thousand dollars on bricks and mortar each decade from 1970 until 2005. In April 2005 the Boston Baptist Social Union decided that it needed to return to the founding purpose of the organization's charter, which is to support ministries that help working

[69] "Church Happenings," *The Vine* 13, no. 5 (November 2006): 8.

people in Boston. Responsibility for the cost of maintaining the premises at 874 Beacon Street was transferred to Ruggles Baptist Church. Encouragingly, in the months following the April 2005 announcement by the Boston Baptist Social Union, the church experienced some growth in congregational giving and increased income from letting space on the premises, trends that bode well for the financial challenges that lie ahead of the congregation as it assumes responsibility for the material fabric of the building it utilizes. The church plans to allocate thirty thousand dollars per year towards annual maintenance costs.

The congregation is not simply interested in maintaining the building in its present condition. Ruggles is seeking to adapt its premises to make it more suitable for worship and mission in the twenty-first century. The building at 874 Beacon Street was designed in an era and on assumptions far removed from the early twenty-first century. Ruggles has sought external assistance to think strategically about the future development of the church's premises. Historic Boston Incorporated awarded Ruggles a matching grant of six thousand dollars for a Technical Assistance Grant to help the church commission a firm of architects to prepare a comprehensive building conditions survey. The church also hopes to draw up plans to renovate the basement (out of use as a result of water damage), reconfigure the kitchen on the third floor, and install a new kitchenette off a meeting room in the steeple stairwell.

Beacon Street Today

Ruggles is flanked on three sides by Boston University South Campus halls of residence. Consequently, the immediate vicinity is densely populated with American

and International students. Travel East on Beacon Street for two blocks and you will reach Kenmore Square, the eastern extremity of Boston University's Charles River Campus, and Fenway Park, home to the Boston Red Sox, a Mecca for Baseball fans. The leafy streets of Brookline, one of the most affluent neighborhoods in Boston, stand ten minutes walk away heading down Beacon Street in a westerly direction.

The 2001 Census Bureau returns for the ZIP Code MA 02215 where Ruggles is located portrays an anomalous demographic profile. Whites constitute the largest racial group (74.2%). Black or African American residents represent a miniscule 3.7% of the population (compared to a national count of 12.3%). Hispanic or Latino residents amount to 7.2% of the population (compared to a national figure of 7.2%). The Asian population stands at 15.5% of the immediate neighborhood and represents the second largest people group on the doorstep of Ruggles Baptist Church.

Three prominent social characteristics are not surprising. First, the population in MA 02215 is highly educated. 71.1% of residents hold a Bachelor's degree or higher. Second, most residents (88.4%) rent the housing units they occupy. The limited duration of degree programs means that a high turnover is characteristic of the local population. Student residence is also necessarily concentrated during Fall and Spring Semesters. Third, young adults dominate the population in ZIP code MA 02215. The median age is 21.7 years and the percentage of adults age 65 and under in the neighbourhood is 98.3% (compared to a national figure of 74.3%). Children under five years of age contribute a tiny 0.6% of the population (compared to a national figure of 6.8%). Adults age sixty-five years old or more represent 3.9% of

the population (compared to a national average of 12.4%). The local area has undoubtedly changed in the wake of Boston University's expansion in the last three decades. There would seem to be little scope for children's ministry and ministry to the elderly. Older and more stable members are always likely to need to travel in from a distance. The median household income is $27,040 (compared to a national average of $41,994). Families living below the poverty level (11.5%) exceeded the national level (9.2%). Individuals below the poverty level amounted to 33.4% (compared to a national figure of 12.4%). The large proportion of individuals below the poverty level is attributable to the stringencies of student budgets and implies a limited financial base for the church to draw upon in the local neighbourhood.

Profile of the Congregation Today: "Students and Internationals Welcome!"

The demographic profile of the congregation broadly reflects that of the locality in which it is located, albeit with some minor variations. The congregation is overwhelmingly white, a people group that can be divided into two distinct constituencies. The first component consists of long-serving families (including children and youth) that reside in Brookline or towns in the Greater Boston area. They typically commute a significant distance to Ruggles. The second component consists of young adults, a mixture of professionals and students, who live in Brookline and Boston proper. Asians constitute the second major people group at Ruggles. They are drawn from several countries, including China, Taiwan, and Indonesia, and are almost all students at Boston University. Less than a handful of African Americans worship at Ruggles. The vast majority of people in the

congregation have arrived in the course of Larry Showalter's twenty-five years of ministry at the church.

Three small groups or house churches meet mid-week to provide fellowship, Bible Study, and prayer. Two of the groups are based in Brookline and one is located in Cambridge. These are the main mid-week activities for adults in the congregation. The fact that most of the children and youth associated with the congregation live significant distances from Ruggles limits the possibility of mid-week children's and youth activities. Its location is most accessible to members that live in Brookline and Boston University students in nearby halls of residence. The church has, in recent years, been much more intentional about reaching students and internationals temporarily resident in the immediate vicinity. A large banner announcing "Students and Internationals Welcome!" adorns the south façade of the church building at the beginning of the Fall and Spring semesters. The church exercises a ministry of hospitality, cultural education, and evangelism to the student population, especially international students, at Boston University, in whom a need for friendship, a desire to learn English, curiosity about Christianity, and the fact of limited financial means are frequently present. The church is less certain about how to expand its presence into Brookline, a district populated largely by a white, wealthy and educated elite, a population that is likely to be more skeptical about religion *per se* and possibly attracted to more liberal expressions of Christianity. Ruggles has wrestled with demographic changes in the Fenway and Kenmore neighborhoods of Beacon Street. It has chosen not to relocate from its present location. Instead, Ruggles is seeking to

adapt to the changes that have occurred in the local community as a result of Boston University's expansion over the last thirty years. Such a decision poses major challenges to the church as it seeks a new lease on life and vitality in its worship and mission at a time when a major stream of financial assistance, namely, income from the Boston Baptist Social Union, towards the maintenance of the church premises has recently been discontinued. Ruggles has set about creating a niche for itself in a community populated by young adults, many from overseas, pursuing studies in an educational environment characterized, paradoxically, by secular and plural tendencies. Ruggles is conscious that there are few houses of worship in its vicinity, a fact that is strikingly symbolic for a congregation that Larry Showalter hopes will sees itself as "A Beacon Light on Beacon Street."[70] The relative absence of houses of worship on the stretch of Beacon Street in close proximity to downtown Boston impresses a sense of responsibility on Ruggles to be a faithful witness to the Gospel.

[70] Larry Showalter, "A Beacon Light on Beacon Street?" *The Beacon Light* (February 2007): 1.

CHAPTER FIVE

JESUS CHRIST IN CONGREGATIONAL WORSHIP AND MISSION

The only hermeneutic of the gospel is a congregation of men and women who believe it and live by it.[1]

Baptist Worship in the United States Today

Worship is the central practice of the Christian church.[2] Yet, unlike some ecclesial traditions, Baptists have paid little attention to the practice of worship until recently.[3] "Baptist historians have told the story of assemblies and conventions, of church planting and church discipline, of denominational progress and decline, but have rarely told the story of the central activity of the Christian community, namely, its worship."[4] In a British context Christopher Ellis, as noted in Chapter Three, has studied the worship of Baptists historically and in the contemporary world to identify the theology and spirituality operative among British Baptists. His academic research has concentrated on the structure and content of Baptist worship to uncover the theology embodied in it. Martin Stringer, also within a British context, has explored the

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[1] Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (London: SPCK, 1989), 227.

[2] Robert E. Webber, *Worship Old & New* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan), 1994.

[3] Raymond Bailey, "The Changing Face of Baptist Worship," *Review and Expositor* 95, no. 1 (1998): 47.

[4] Christopher J. Ellis, "Duty and Delight: Baptist Worship and Identity," *Review and Expositor* 100, no. 3 (2003): 330.

perceptions of worship present in the understanding of individual members of a Baptist congregation in Manchester, England.[5] In an American Context, Mary Fulkerson's study of ecclesial practices, including worship, in a multiracial United Methodist Church has broken new ground through its attention to what people actually do as opposed to focusing narrowly on what people believe.[6] "Living with Jesu*s*" extends the scholarly study of Christian worship in the United States by attending to the concrete worship of two Baptist congregations in the city of Boston, First Baptist Church in Jamaica Plain and Ruggles Baptist Church, to elucidate the understanding of Jesus Christ actually at work in the corporate lives of these congregations and the individual lives of the people that belong to them. Before considering the practice of worship in these two congregations, it will be helpful to briefly review the historic and contemporary practice of worship among Baptists in the United States.

Paul Basden paints a tongue-in-cheek picture of public worship among Baptists in the United States that suggests a more or less uniform pattern prevailed historically:

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[5] Martin D. Stringer, *On the Perception of Worship* (Birmingham: Birmingham University Press, 1999), 83-108.

[6] Mary McClintock Fulkerson, *Places of Redemption: Theology for a Worldly Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

> Once upon a time, all Baptists worshipped the same way. They attended worship services on Sunday at 11.00 a.m. They listened to the swell of a pipe organ as they quietly awaited the beginning of the worship service. They followed a planned order of worship, written on a bulletin. They sang familiar congregational hymns that they knew and loved. They thrilled in the sound of a choir singing a powerful anthem. They heard a sermon from the Bible on how to love and trust God. Then they dismissed at 12 noon in order to beat the Methodists to the cafeteria.[7]

Basden acknowledges a sentence or two later that any person claiming to speak for all Baptists is venturing into the realm of falsehood and illusion.[8] Baptists have always worshipped in a variety of ways. Today, several styles of worship exist across the spectrum of Baptists in the United States.[9] Basden identifies five forms of worship currently practiced among Baptists: liturgical, traditional, revivalist, praise and worship, and seeker.[10] The Baptist congregations studied in "Living with Jesus" exhibit contrasting styles of public worship. First Baptist Church in Jamaica Plain practices a pattern of worship shaped by the traditional form described by Basden and a long-standing ecumenical orientation towards liturgically ordered worship. Ruggles Baptist Church embodies a pattern of praise and worship influenced by the culture of

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[7] Paul Basden, "Something Old, Something New: Worship Styles for Baptists in the Nineties," in *Ties That Bind: Life Together in the Baptist Vision*, ed. Gary A. Furr and Curtis W. Freeman (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 1994), 171.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Bailey, "The Changing Face of Baptist Worship," 47-58.

[10] Basden, "Something Old, Something New," 173.

charismatic renewal current in much of the evangelical movement in North America.[11]

Method of Studying Congregations

Christopher Ellis' study of British Baptist worship relies primarily on historical research into Baptist records, contemporary surveys, and his wide personal experience of contemporary Baptist worship. In effect, Ellis presents a broad historical and contemporary overview of Baptist worship. " Living with Jesus" complements Ellis by adopting an ethnographic approach to examine in detail the convictions about Jesus Christ embodied in the worship, mission, and everyday life of two contemporary American Baptist Churches (USA) congregations.

In order to collect the material required for "Living with Jesus", I attended First Baptist Church in Jamaica Plain for four months in the Spring and Summer of 2006 (April to July) and Ruggles Baptist Church for the same amount of time through the Fall and Winter of the same year (September to December). During each block of four months I acted as a participant observer in Sunday morning services. I made notes of what took place, the key people leading in public worship, content of sermons, the physical space in which public worship was conducted, and congregational practices. As a participant observer I also attended Adult Bible Studies, Church Council Meetings, Church Meetings, and took part in a work party to clean up the grounds at First Baptist. In addition, I conducted in depth, semi-

[11] Donald E. Miller, *Reinventing American Protestantism: Christianity in the New Millennium* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1997), 80-92.

structured interviews with approximately twenty people from each congregation, which explored how people first came to learn about Jesus Christ, their present understanding of the life, teaching, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and how their convictions about Jesus Christ impact daily life. These interviews were recorded and transcribed. Documents provided a third source of data. I examined official church histories, weekly bulletins, the monthly newsletter produced by each congregation, manuscripts of sermons, a hymn book, songs displayed via a data projector, church websites, and news articles on the internet.

Worship and Mission at First Baptist Church in Jamaica Plain

We are a Christian community of many cultures, one faith! United in our diversity and strengthened by the Holy Spirit, we gather together in worship, witness and service, to glorify God and follow the example of Jesus Christ's inclusive love.[12]
(Mission Statement, First Baptist Church in Jamaica Plain)

The Worship Service

First Baptist Church in Jamaica Plain gathers for Sunday worship in a box-shaped space created by joining two trailers together. These simple facilities include a communal meeting space, a parish office, and a bathroom. The lectern is positioned in the northwest corner of the meeting space with a portable electronic organ adjacent to it. Banners hang on the walls on either side of the lectern, but the "Stars and Stripes", the national flag of the United States, is nowhere displayed in the temporary

[12] First Baptist Church website: www.firstbaptistjp.org.

worship space. Chairs stand in rows arranged in a semi-circle facing the lectern. Over the course of Lent a wooden cross, situated in front of the lectern, takes shape, carved by Lance Laird. Otherwise, the décor of the trailer is sparse. Tables stand against both walls in the northeast corner and are used to display free literature and serve refreshments following the service. The compactness of the meeting space creates a sense of informality and intimacy.

On entry to the trailer on a Sunday morning, the worshipper is welcomed by a steward and handed a bulletin, New Revised Standard Version Bible, and Hymn Book. The order of service is reproduced in full over three or four pages in the bulletin. An illustration relating to the Biblical or liturgical theme for the day normally adorns the front cover. While I was there, these included Jesus entering Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, Jesus sleeping in a boat while a storm rages, the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, and, on Trinity Sunday, a symbol representing the Godhead. The front cover of the bulletin also displays the calendar date and the appropriate place in the Liturgical Year. Worship at First Baptist Church in Jamaica Plain, follows the regular cycle of the Liturgical Year, which traces the outline of the life of Jesus Christ from infancy (Advent and Christmas) through to his suffering, death, and resurrection (Lent, Easter, Pentecost, and Ascension).

An organ prelude, normally a piece of sacred music, precedes the formal Welcome and Call to Worship. Ashlee Wiest-Laird, the pastor, wears a gown and stole, when leading worship and preaching. The opening call to worship is a responsive reading derived from Scripture. Worshippers are encouraged to greet one

another. "Good Morning" is written in ten different languages in the order of service to convey a welcome across borders of language, ethnicity, and culture. First Baptist practices a "hymn-sandwich" pattern of worship. The service is punctuated by the singing of songs from *The New Century Hymnal*.[13] A hymn is sung immediately after the welcome and then the congregation join together in the Lord's Prayer, which is printed in both English and Spanish. Worshippers are invited to use "the language that is most authentic/meaningful"[14] to them. The English language version of the Lord's Prayer appears with alternative words for "Father" and "kingdom", namely, "Creator" and "kin-dom". A liturgical response follows the Lord's Prayer and then young children are invited to come forward and sit on the floor for a Children's Circle Time or brief message intended specifically for them, after which they depart for Sunday school classes in the parsonage.

A small choir sings an anthem and members of the congregation read the Scripture passages for the day set by the Revised Common Lectionary. The sermon is the central element in worship and normally concludes with a question or challenge to the listeners. Ashlee Wiest-Laird preaches in an informal, clear, and direct manner, building upon one of the Scripture passages set for the day. She skilfully weaves in stories from the wider church, personal testimony, and humor. A hymn offers an opportunity to respond to what has been heard. Prayers of the people are normally

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[13] United Church Board for Homeland Ministries, *The New Century Hymnal* (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 1995). The *New Century Hymnal* was recommended to the church membership by a specially convened task group to serve as the main resource for sung worship at First Baptist.

[14] *First Baptist Church in Jamaica Plain*, Weekly Bulletin, July 23, 2006: 3.

part of the response to the sermon and may be written or extempore supplications to God.

An inclusive ethos is modelled in a variety of concrete forms. The selection of congregational songs from *The New Century Hymnal* used in the four months that I attended worship at First Baptist drew upon material from the global church. Furthermore, a deliberate effort was made to incorporate some Spanish songs in public worship on Sundays. Spanish songs, prayers, and responses were used throughout the order of service on Maundy Thursday. Two female African American preachers delivered the sermon on Sunday morning in the four months from April to July. Children were welcomed to communion. Blended families and a spectrum of ethnic identities are represented in the congregation on a Sunday morning.

Texts, Themes, and Content of Sermons at First Baptist

Six preachers delivered sermons at First Baptist Church from the beginning of April through to the end of July. Ashlee Wiest-Laird preached eleven sermons, the student pastor preached twice, and four guest speakers preached one sermon each. Although the congregation heard six different voices, an overarching consistency characterized the preaching at First Baptist. Several factors shaped this consistent ethos. First, the Revised Common Lectionary determined the texts used as the basis for sermons in keeping with the movement in the Liturgical Year from Lent through to Easter and then beyond to Pentecost and Trinity Sunday. The story of Jesus was very prominent in this part of the Liturgical Year and the preachers understandably

erred towards the narrative of the Gospels as they related to Lent and Easter. Second, the Adult Sunday School, which met after the morning service, provided another context in which members could explore the present-day implications of living like Jesus. The group spent most of the four months from April to July working its way through the second half of a study guide on the Gospel according to Mark, *"Say to This Mountain" Mark's Story of Discipleship*[15], written by Ched Myers[16] and others, that advanced a social and political reading of Jesus and his ministry. Third, Wiest-Laird's initiative to persuade First Baptist to become a Welcoming and Affirming congregation greatly influenced the sequence of preaching from May 7 to June 18, when the Annual Church Meeting decided the issue. Fourth, most of the guest preachers exhibited a theological outlook consistent with Ashlee Wiest-Laird, which emphasizes the radical inclusivity of God's love and the centrality of Jesus Christ for the life of faith.[17] Fifth, the doublewide trailer was a perpetual reminder of the fire that wreaked such damage to the church's house of worship. The fact of the fire and the challenge it posed to the church served as the background against which all sermons were preached at First Baptist Church in Jamaica Plain. Sustaining hope despite a reversal in fortune at a critical moment in the revitalization of the church

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[15] Ched Myers, Marie Dennis, Joseph Nangle, OFM, Cynthia Moe-Lobeda, and Stuar Taylor, *"Say to This Mountain" Mark's Story of Discipleship* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996).

[16] Ched Myers studied under James McClendon.

[17] Three of the guest preachers shared a common theological educational background. Two were currently students at Andover Newton Theological School and one had previously undertaken studies at the same institution.

constituted a significant challenge to all preachers at First Baptist in the Spring and early Summer of 2006. Each of these social and organizational realities shaped the way the message of Jesus was preached during that time. In conversation with those realities, six christological themes stood out in the preaching I listened to during my time as a participant observer at First Baptist.

Jesus announced the kingdom of God in word and deed. The Palm Sunday sermon on April 9, based on Mark 11:1-10, interpreted Jesus' entry into Jerusalem as an enacted parable, a way of proclaiming the kingdom of God, a divine initiative and reality that creates new relations between God and people characterized by peace and justice, in contrast to the imperial might of Rome, which embodies powers hostile to God, exemplified by oppression and violence, and alienates people from God and their fellow human beings. The title given to the sermon, "Location, Location, Location," indicates the choice presented to followers of Jesus. They must decide where they stand, and which reality they identify with, the kingdom of God or the powers opposed to God present in the political, social, military, and religious institutions typified by Rome.

Jesus mixed with the marginalized, invited the outcast to be his friends, and established the foundations for a new inclusive community of faith open to all people. Three sermons pursued this theme between May 7 and June 11 in the run up to the church meeting decision about whether on not to become a Welcoming and Affirming congregation. "That Steady Beat" (May 7), preached by the student pastor, considers the call of Matthew the tax collector recorded in the Gospel that bears his name

(Matthew 9:9-13). Tax collectors were despised and unpopular among Jews, because they were perceived as traitors by virtue of their willingness to collaborate with the Roman occupying forces to collect taxes. Jesus, in contrast to his contemporaries, called the most reviled members of the community to be with him. Further evidence of Jesus' radical inclusiveness is seen in his habit of eating in mixed company. Even at the Last Supper with his disciples, he made space at the table for Peter who denied him and Judas who betrayed him. Jesus brought people together. The lesson to learn from Jesus is never to give up where disagreements occur in the life of the church, because he never stops inviting people into his circle of conversation. The sermon "Friends of Jesus" (May 21) inspired by John 15:12-17 pointed out that Jesus chose the disciples to be his friends. People on the margins are the kind of people Jesus befriended. His followers need to ask whether or not people feel that they are among friends when they encounter First Baptist? "Faith and Pride", preached on Trinity Sunday (June 11) and based on Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30 stressed that in the Gospels Jesus is found among people on the margins. The application of the text is suggested by the claim that today Jesus is still to be discovered among those marginalized by church and society. First Baptist has the opportunity to proclaim the radical inclusive love of God and show solidarity, as Jesus did, with people on the edge of mainstream society.

Jesus challenges people to choose the kingdom of God and follow his example. The Palm Sunday (April 9) sermon, as noted earlier, evoked a clear need to choose between either the kingdom of God or the powers opposed to God. In the sermon

"For the Love of God" (April 30), preached by the student pastor from Andover Newton and derived from the story of the woman caught in adultery (John 7:53-8:11), the hearer is asked to consider the basis of his or her faith: hate, shame, guilt or love, grace, forgiveness? Jesus is significant because he alters the way we think about God and so necessitates a choice about the basis for the way we live. Jesus shows us that God is fundamentally about love and we are invited to choose the love of God as the basis and source of inspiration for our lives. On June 11 in a sermon entitled "Faith and Pride" Wiest-Laird challenged the congregation at First Baptist to be true to its call to be an inclusive community of faith and extend its welcome to gays and lesbians. The message for the day was based on Matthew 11:16-19 and 25-30 where Jesus depicts his ministry and that of John the Baptist in contrasting fashion and yet both are subject to criticism, "For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon'; the Son of Man came eating and drinking and they say, 'Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of sinners!' Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds." Jesus did not conform to the expectations of people in his own generation. Wiest-Laird concludes. "Truth is, no matter what we say or do someone will be offended…. The good news, Jesus informs us is that it doesn't really matter what other people think, 'wisdom is vindicated by her deeds.' In other words, it's what YOU do that counts, not what others think, and it may be that only time will prove the wisdom of your actions." The knowledge that you cannot please all the people all the time is liberating, because "you now have the possibility to follow the leading of God's spirit in your own heart and conscience."

The theme of choosing the Jesus way reached a climax on June 18. In "Grasping the Struggle" (Luke 12:49-56) Wiest-Laird suggested that every generation of the church must read the signs of the times and recognize when it is confronted by Kairos moments or decisive turning-points in history. "Kairos is a moment of grace and opportunity. It is the favorable time in which God issues a challenge to decisive action." The anti-apartheid movement in South Africa and the Civil Rights Movement in the United States were Kairos moments, when the church had to decide to act. Jesus did not maintain the status quo or remain neutral. Instead, he chose to stand with the oppressed and challenged those in power. The great cloud of witnesses (Hebrews 11:26-12:2) that surrounds contemporary Christians consists of all those who have recognized Kairos moments and chosen to do what is difficult but, nonetheless, right as followers of Jesus Christ. Wiest-Laird exhorts her listeners to persevere in the journey of faith and ends with a question pertinent to the church meeting following the morning service on June 18 to decide whether or not First Baptist would become a Welcoming and Affirming congregation, "Is today an opportune time to grasp the struggle?"

Jesus died on the cross because he was faithful to the kingdom of God. The preaching at First Baptist emphasises the exemplary character of Jesus' death. Living in obedience to the kingdom of God is costly and elicits opposition. Jesus' death is exemplary in the sense that he illustrates what happens or can happen as a consequence of faithfulness to God, and his willingness to surrender his life in a self-denying way acts to inspire a similar pattern of life in those who follow him. Ashlee

Wiest-Laird makes the exemplary character of Jesus' death very clear in her sermon "A Grain of Wheat" preached on April 2:

> I hear of a man who said unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. What fool said that, I thought … Jesus was that grain of wheat that opened itself to life, to suffering, to death. Jesus was that grain of wheat that died to bring new life. Jesus invested himself in the lives of others and modelled for us the path of faith that we are called to follow. Good news to the poor is what Jesus proclaimed and today we have an opportunity to participate in making good news a reality for poor people around the globe.

The statement, "Jesus was that grain of wheat that died to bring new life" is pregnant with ambiguity. Different meanings can be assigned to the phrase "new life" because it is not defined. It could be a hint that the cross accomplishes something objective on behalf of others, or it might point to Jesus' death being a source of inspiration to his disciples work for a better quality of life. The sermon moves quickly to the idea that Jesus proclaimed Good News to the poor and that it is incumbent upon the followers of Jesus to work to alleviate the suffering of the poor. In the context, then, the second interpretation of "new life" might seem more likely, but the ambiguity remains. The congregation are encouraged to write to members of Congress, "We need to write and let them know that ending hunger is our priority and it should also be theirs." Sample letters and envelopes were made available after the close of worships for people to act and the church covered the cost of postage. The challenge to live like Jesus is summed up in the final paragraph of the prayer that ends the sermon:

All those who die like Jesus
Sacrificing their lives out of love
For the sake of a more dignified human
Life
Will inherit life in all its fullness.
They are like grains of wheat
Dying to produce life,
Being buried in the ground
Only to break through and grow

Amen.

Neither the sermon nor the prayer spell out exactly what the life ("new life" or "life in all its fullness") that follows sacrificial self-giving to the point of death, looks like. The clearest inference to be drawn from both the sermon and the concluding prayer is that such sacrifice contributes to the improvement of the quality of material life in this world for others. Does it make any difference to the person that surrenders his life to help his or her fellow human beings? The sermon does not answer this question.

God raised Jesus from the dead. The resurrection of Jesus from the dead is God's act of vindication of Jesus and the foundation of Christian hope,[18] which sustains people in adversity and inspires them to work for a better world. On Easter Day (April 16) the Revised Common Lectionary set Mark 16:1-8 as the Gospel Reading and the sermon title confidently proclaimed the heart of the Christian faith, "Christ is Risen!" Wiest-Laird observed of the women that discovered the empty tomb, "These women knew too well the harshness of injustice and the bitterness of death. How could they possibly hold out hope that once again they would commune with their crucified teacher?" The question posed by Wiest-Laird is immediately

[18] Ashlee Wiest-Laird, "Christ is Risen!" (April 16, 2006).

followed by three vignettes of people, Jane, Nina, and Hassan, experiencing poverty and great adversity as a consequence of injustice and social conditions beyond their control. The Christian faith speaks a word of hope to such people:

> A day is coming, we of faith proclaim, when the oppressed will be liberated, the hungry fed and the poor set free. A day is coming, we announce to Jane, Nina and Hassan, when God's vision of justice and compassion will be made real for all people. Yes, we say that day is on the way. But why would Jane and Nina and Hassan believe us? Why should they trust something as preposterous as 'God loves us all the same', or 'There is enough for everyone'?

The answer lies in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead:

> And yet, despite their fear, their terror and amazement, something miraculous happened to those three women after their visit to the empty tomb. Somewhere along the way, they came to believe that Jesus had indeed been raised from the dead and in fact, they themselves encountered the risen Christ. … Our faith is dependent upon the reality that those women were transformed by the power of the resurrection. Because Christ had risen, because God had vindicated the life and passion of Jesus, because Jesus had not been forsaken by God the earliest disciples knew that they too were being raised up. . . .Their despairing hearts were filled with hope. Their fearful spirits transformed by love.

Jesus, through his risen presence, is a source of hope and empowers people to live lives for the kingdom of God:

> Sisters and brothers, on this Easter morning let me tell you that no matter the state we're in, our lives can be transformed. The living God longs for us to be liberated from fear, loneliness and pain. We are each beloved by God more than we can ever imagine. Jesus' life confirms God's abundant grace to everyone. Jesus' teaching opens our eyes to see a God who desires goodness and blessing for all creation. Jesus' execution affirms for us that there is resistance to this good news, but the resurrection is vindication that love is truly stronger than death. . . . Surely, Christ is rising up in us! Surely, Christ is rising up in the First Baptist Church of Jamaica Plain. Let us be glad and rejoice in God's salvation! Amen!

Jesus is a personal presence in times of trouble that can be relied on to help like a friend. This theme is consonant with the conviction that Jesus has been raised from the dead, a key idea in the preaching at First Baptist. The sermon "Complete Joy" (April 23) reminded the congregation that although the early Christians had seen Jesus die on the cross, they had then subsequently experienced him alive again. Their lives were totally transformed because they experienced the risen Christ. The Good News is that Christians know the grace of God (through the risen Christ) and should be willing (joyfully) to share the story of what God has done. Wiest-Laird reminded the congregation that the testimony of First Baptist and all Christians is that they know the grace of God. "We have a story to tell to the nations." The sermon on June 25, preached by a member of the church part way through a Master of Divinity degree at Andover Newton Theological School, encouraged people to move from fear to faith. The sermon examined the stilling of the storm by Jesus recorded in Mark 4:35-41. Just as the storm swirled around Jesus, so our fears swirl around us. Jesus seems to be asleep in the boat. God seems to be silent, absent, and uncaring to us. We get through these difficult experiences by acknowledging we are afraid and asking for help. Jesus is the one we need to call upon to still the storms we face.

The human condition is occasionally characterized in terms of personal sin (an individual's rebellion against God) in the preaching at First Baptist. In the sermon "For the Love of God" (April 30) it was acknowledged that no human being is without sin. Indeed, sins accumulate over time and a potential hazard is that a sense of guilt can distort our image of God. The sermon moves quickly to assert it is vital

to remember that Christ forgives and all are precious in the sight of God. Fundamentally, the Gospel is about the love of God. The congregation is urged not to pass up the opportunity to accept the love of God. "Grounded in Love" based on John 6:1-14 (July 30) reinforced the theme of experiencing the love of God in Jesus Christ. Jesus reveals and enables his followers to experience the love of God. Christians are to work for peace and in their life together as the church present an alternative vision of how life is meant to be. Sermons at First Baptist repeatedly challenged, urged, and encouraged the congregation to work for a better world. The underlying premise about the human condition is that systemic factors (political, economic, social, religious, and military institutions) are responsible for division and oppressive conditions that spoil human life. These systemic conditions need to be transformed and it is the task of those who follow Jesus Christ to do so by working for peace and justice.

The Story of Jesus and Christology: Story and Doctrine

Historically, Christian doctrine has claimed that if the Gospel story is true it has implications for our understanding about God and Jesus Christ. The preaching at First Baptist does not penetrate behind the story to ask what the identity of Jesus Christ and the nature of his relation to God must be like if the story is true and so avoids doctrinal themes such as the Incarnation, Atonement, and Trinity. A certain resistance to exploring doctrine is apparent, I think, because doctrine is perceived to be inflexible and prone to cause disagreement. This assumption is not unwarranted,

but if permitted to dictate policy means that difficult aspects of Christian teaching may be surrendered prematurely to the realm of mystery or simply avoided because thinking about such things is hard work. Paul Fiddes observes that story is suggestive and by its very nature has the potential to open up new pathways in the human imagination, whereas doctrine inclines to defining terms and concepts; it is concerned with closing options down:

> Poetic metaphor and narrative rejoices in ambiguity and the opening up of multiple meaning, doctrine will always seek to reduce to concepts the images and stories upon which it draws – including those within its own Scriptures. Literature emphasizes the playful freedom of imagination, while doctrine aims to create a consistent and coherent system of thought, putting into concepts the wholeness of reality that imagination is feeling after.[19]

It is not difficult to see the attraction of remaining focused on story. Stories by their very nature are open to many different interpretations. Emphasizing story can be a strategy for enabling multiple points of view to inhabit the same social space, which is an intentional outcome at First Baptist, although it is no guarantee that conflict will be avoided. Three consequences follow from avoiding the challenge of thinking conceptually about the significance of the Gospel story and so moving into the sphere of Christian doctrine or teaching. First, we limit our capacity to fathom the depths of God and God's purposes for human beings. Historically, Christian doctrine has developed out of attempts to understand what the story of Jesus means for our understanding of God and our lives (including our picture of reality) and has always entailed placing the Gospel story in dialogue with human experience and sources of

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[19] Paul S. Fiddes, "Concept, Image and Story in Systematic Theology," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 11, no. 1 (2009): 323.

knowledge other than revelation. Thinking conceptually is, therefore, unavoidable unless we choose to refrain from engaging with the world the people of God are called to witness to and so effectively compartmentalize human life. The Apostle Paul exhorts the readers of his letter to the Romans to "be transformed by the renewing of your minds" (Romans 12:2) and so indicates that the human capacity to think, reason, imagine, and will are to be transformed by the Gospel story. The Gospel story will only fully transform our stories if people are prepared to think and conceptualize and so allow the Gospel to form a Christian mind.

Second, we risk not engaging with the context in which we are seeking to interpret and make sense of the Gospel story. If Christians simply immerse themselves in the Biblical story and refuse to interact with humans stories, personal and public, they run the risk of being unable to translate the Good News of Jesus Christ into categories of thought that can be grasped by people unfamiliar with Christianity. Onlookers may be intrigued and attracted (or threatened) by the way that Christians live, and so some account of the Christian understanding of God, reality, and human life is required to address the questions that arise within particular cultural contexts. A transformed life serves to authenticate Christian claims alongside a credible account or apologetic that makes conceptual sense. A Christ-like life and a Gospel shaped way of looking at God, oneself, other people, and the world is not, in Christian terms, simply the product of unaided human reason and experience. From a Christian perspective, the person and work of the Holy Spirit enables a transformed life and convinces the human mind of the truth of the Gospel.

Third, stories in practice are not interpreted from a neutral perspective but are filtered through interpretative lenses. Thus one story appears to be more important than another or particular aspects of a story appear more significant than others. The empirical research reported in "Living with Jesus" illustrates that the story of Jesus is interpreted in different ways. Conceptual frameworks influence how the Gospel story is heard, which bits are deemed to be important, and how Jesus impacts congregations and the everyday lives of believers. To become aware of the conceptual framework through which the story of Jesus is filtered opens up the prospect of critical evaluation and potentially change.

Songs in Worship

Worship services at First Baptist employ a mix of traditional and modern hymns drawn from *The New Century Hymnal*,[20] a compilation of songs prepared for the United Church of Christ. *The New Church Hymnal* incorporates hymns written for English speaking churches, mainly in North America and the United Kingdom, and songs gathered from the global church.

An accomplished musician who has competed in several international competitions plays the electronic organ for the church on Sunday mornings, selects the sacred music performed in pubic worship, and directs the small but enthusiastic church choir. An aesthetic preference for sacred music, hymns (traditional and

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[20] United Church Board for Homeland Ministries, *The New Century Hymnal* (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 1995).

modern), anthems, choir music, black gospel, and experimentation with music from around the world, especially Latin America, was reflected in the practice of congregational worship and the comments of several members in the course of interviews. Contemporary Christian Music of the type associated with new church networks, like the Vineyard Fellowship, and Ruggles Baptist Church, was not viewed positively. The dislike stems from an aesthetic preference for a more traditional or classical style of music with melody and a perception that the lyrics of much Contemporary Christian Music are simplistic, repetitive, and boring.

The New Century Hymnal, like many hymn collections, is organized thematically around orders of worship (services of word and sacrament), hymns of praise to God (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit), the Christian Year (Advent through to Reign of Christ), the faith and order of the church (the church, ministry, and sacraments), the life and work of the church, and Christian hope. At First Baptist, hymns were selected in keeping with the significance of the day in the Christian Year (Easter Day, Pentecost, Trinity Sunday), appropriateness to the theme of the sermon (Christian Unity, Struggle and Conflict, Comfort and Assurance) and relevance to special features incorporated in a service such as the celebration of communion.

Hymns to Christ and about Christ were prominent all through the four months I attended First Baptist as a participant observer, in the hymns sung by the congregation, anthems sung by the choir, and also in solo pieces. Five key christological themes appeared in the hymnody at First Baptist: the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, the risen presence of Jesus with his followers, the death of Jesus

and the saving significance of the cross, devotion to and friendship with Jesus, and the Christian community or church.

The resurrection of Jesus featured strongly on Easter Day (April 16) and the second Sunday of Easter (April 23). Congregational singing on Easter Day commenced with "Christ is Risen! Shout Hosanna!"[21], followed by "Because You Live, O Christ," and, finally, "I Come with Joy". The Second Sunday of Easter continued the theme of resurrection with "Christ the Lord is Risen Today," "I'll Shout the Name of Christ Who Lives," and "The Day of Resurrection":

I'll Shout Aloud the Name of Christ Who Lives
I'll shout the name of Christ who lives,
Who lives, who lives that all might live,
Christ broke death's power at Calvary,
And now I know from sin I'm free.

Dear brothers sing among all here,
And leap with joy, my sisters dear,
Alone at home we seek our peace,
And there Jesus comes to bring release.

Once more we shout our joy and praise,
To One we love, whose throne is grace,
Whose way is Life, whose Word fulfils
As we in gladness do God's will.

The Doxology "O Christ, Now Risen From the Grave" was used in public worship on the fourth (May 7), fifth (May 14), sixth (May 21), and Seventh (May 2) Sundays in Easter:

[21] This hymn is not found in *The New Century Hymnal* and was included on a special insert inside the weekly bulletin.

O Christ, now risen from the grave
You live our lives to bless and save
We lift our voices up in praise
O let us serve you all our days

This brief acclamation of Christ affirms his resurrection from the grave and on-going risen presence with his followers to bless and save them, and depicts the followers of Jesus responding with praise and service.

The presence of the risen Jesus in the lives of his followers was a second key theme in public worship. His presence is especially associated with the celebration of communion on the first Sunday of every month. Hymns sung at First Baptist that celebrated encounter with the risen Jesus in the practice of communion included "Here, O My Lord, I see You Face to Face" (May 7), "Draw us in the Spirit's Tether" (May 7 and July 2), and "Be Known to Us in the Breaking of Bread" (June 7).[22]

The preaching and hymns at First Baptist repeatedly declared and celebrated the resurrection of Jesus and his continuing presence in the Christian life. As the next chapter illustrates, however, a significant number of individuals within the congregation struggled with the Christian witness that God raised Jesus from the dead. A tension exists between the christology embodied in the congregational worship (sermons and songs) practiced at First Baptist and the christological convictions held by some ordinary believers within the congregation.

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[22] British Baptist theologians are presently exploring the sacramental character of baptism and communion. For example, Paul S. Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces: Baptist Identity in Church and Theology* (Carlisle, Cumbria: Paternoster Press, 2003), 107-192.

Hymns expressing devotion to Jesus and celebrating the friendship he offers to his followers appeared frequently. "Blessed Assurance" (May 14), "I want Jesus to Go with Me" (May 14), "Before Your Cross, O Jesus" (April 2), "O For a Thousand Tongues to Sing" (June 4), "O Jesus, I Have Promised" (July 16), "Jesu, Jesu, Fill Us with Your Love" (July 30), and "What a Friend We Have in Jesus" (May 21). The first verse of "Blessed Assurance" and "What a Friend we Have in Jesus" especially convey a strong sense of devotion to Jesus and his unwavering friendship:

Blessed Assurance
Blessed Assurance, Jesus is mine! O what a
Foretaste of glory divine! Heir of salvation, purchase of God
Born of the Spirit, washed in Christ's blood
This is my story, this is my song, praising my Savior all the day long.
This is my story, this is my song, praising my Savior all the day long.

What A Friend We Have in Jesus
What a friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and griefs to bear!
What a privilege to carry everything to God in prayer!
Oh, what peace we often forfeit, oh what needless pain we bear,
All because we do not carry everything to God in prayer.

Have we trials and temptations? Is there trouble anywhere?
We should never be discouraged: take it to the Lord in prayer!
Can we find a friend so faithful, who will all our sorrows share?
Jesus knows our every weakness; take it to our God in prayer!

Are we weak and heavy laden, burdened with a load of care?
Precious Savior, still our refuge, take it to our God in prayer!
Do your friends despise, forsake you? Take it to our God in prayer!
Jesus' arms will take and shield you, you will find a solace there.

The theme of friendship with Jesus is powerfully expressed in a solo piece of music, "Friend of Jesus", sung by Lance Laird on May 21, which portrays Jesus as an attractive personality that drew different types of people into his circle of friendship,

and still welcomes all sorts of people as companions today. Echoes of Evangelical and Southern Baptist piety that stress the winsomeness of Jesus' personality and his offer of friendship, especially to the lowly and outcast, trickle through the words of the song:

Friend of Jesus[23]
Jesus was a friend of John,
Jesus was a friend of Paul,
He was a friend of Matthew, James on down the line,
I do believe I'd of been a friend of Jesus in his time

Jesus walked the streets at night
Jesus, he didn't need a light
Jesus walked with the harlot and ran with the humdrum kind
And I do believe I'd of been a friend of Jesus in his time

Jesus hung with the hard line gang
Jesus knew the songs they sang
Jesus, he didn't have no money, I hear he didn't have a dime,
And I do believe I'd of been a friend of Jesus in his time

Good God Almighty, my darling Jesus
You are a friend of mine
Come on along, we'll sing another song about Jesus in his prime

They caught him in the yard, the national guard,
and Jesus he was crucified
Open up the door, he's seen it all before
And you ain't lived until you've died

Good God Almighty, my darling Jesus
You are a friend of mine

The song celebrates the fact that Jesus attracts a diverse collection of individuals (Matthew, James, Paul, harlots, the humdrum kind and the one singing the song) and

[23] Words supplied by Lance Laird. The song "Friend of Jesus" appears on an album by Darrell E. Adams called *Songs and Hymns*.

antagonizes the authorities (represented by the national guard). He is simultaneously a threat to the establishment and a friend to individuals on the margins of human community that respond gladly to his offer of friendship.

Hymns focused on the cross or alluding to salvation occupied a less prominent place in public worship. They included "Before Your Cross, O Jesus" (April 2), "Amazing Grace" (May 14), "Blessed Assurance" (May 14), "Love Divine, All Loves Excelling" (June 18), and "O For a Thousand Tongues to Sing" (June 4). The theology of atonement expressed in these hymns, where Jesus is portrayed dying for the forgiveness of sins, is at variance with the beliefs of some ordinary believers at First Baptist and receives little attention in the preaching from the pulpit.

The final christological theme evident in the hymns sung at First Baptist celebrates the life and mission of the community of faith inspired by Jesus Christ. The bulk of these hymns focus on the unity and inclusive character of the church. "Community of Christ" (April 9), "Draw us in the Spirit's Tether" (May 7), "Sheaves of Summer" (April 2), "Blessed be the Tie that Binds" (May 14), "God of Grace and God of Glory" (June 11), and "In Christ There is No East or West" (July 16) all proclaim the unity in diversity created by faith in Jesus Christ and in varying degrees the commission of Christ to witness to the kingdom of God by working for a better world.

Mission: An Embryonic Social Activist Church[24]

In the decade preceding the arrival of Ashlee Wiest-Laird, First Baptist's missionary presence in Jamaica Plain was restricted to the fact of its building, maintaining public worship on Sunday mornings, and the operation of the Thrift Shop. The latter aimed to be a demonstration of practical love in action, a silent witness to the church's desire to be of use to the local community through the voluntary service rendered by the church members that operated the Thrift Shop. First Baptist depended on new people coming to it (an attraction based model of mission), a strategy that patently did not work to reverse numerical decline and diminishing of institutional vitality.

Faced with the possibility of extinction at the turn of the new millennium, First Baptist chose to invest its accumulated financial resources in calling a new pastor with a mandate to re-energize the congregation and re-connect it with the local community in Jamaica Plain. A missionary perspective was needed to give the congregation any prospect of a future. Thus, the church agreed that fifty percent of the pastor's time should be dedicated to the pastoral care of the congregation and fifty percent to outreach into the local community. Wiest-Laird's energy in getting out and meeting people in the local community in Jamaica Plain coupled with a winsome personality and willingness to speak directly about her understanding of Jesus and what it means to follow him have played crucial roles in drawing new people into the

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[24] David A. Roozen, William McKinney, and Jackson W. Carroll, *Varieties of Religious Presence: Mission in Public Life* (New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1984), 35.

congregation at First Baptist. Wiest-Laird has encouraged First Baptist to partner with local community groups and congregations committed to working for the local people in Jamaica Plain. She has consistently advocated on behalf of gay and lesbian people, commending the State of Massachusetts' decision to permit gay marriage, participating in gay pride marches, and working to persuade First Baptist to become a Welcoming and Affirming congregation. A critique of the wider social, political, and economic order in society at large, indeed, internationally, is an ingredient of her preaching.

Mission, in the practice of Wiest-Laird, is about calling people to become followers of Jesus. To become a follower of Jesus is not principally about being forgiven to gain eternity. Rather to follow Jesus is to imitate his example and be an advocate and agent of the kingdom of God, the in-breaking power and presence of God that transforms individual lives and society. The kingdom of God ('kin-dom' is Wiest-Laird's preferred term) creates a new set of inclusive relationships and challenges the existing conventions and structures of society. Congregants certainly understand Wiest-Laird to be committed to social justice and the transformation of society. As one of the newer members of the church put it, "This is very new to me, but this concept of social justice, that God, you know, Jesus is here for the oppressed. This is really Pastor Ashlee's message that I'm getting out of it." For Wiest-Laird, the Christian life is not about winning people to personal faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior to get into heaven, nor is it simply about observing the Golden Rule and living out a personal moral code of reciprocal goodness. Following Jesus in the

contemporary world is about challenging systemic injustice, pro-actively reaching out to the marginalized, and working to make the local community in which one resides a better place for all. Following Jesus is about making a difference to the world here and now.

Immediately after the fire that ravaged the congregation's building in 2005, First Baptist met for Sunday services in the local Unitarian house of worship. However, Wiest-Laird and the congregation soon realized the importance of reclaiming a physical presence on the site of the church building, even though it remained an eyesore, to let the local community know that First Baptist was still alive and active. The solution was to hire a trailer as a temporary home for First Baptist's congregation. First Baptist's burnt out shell of a building was a hindrance to mission in so far as it consumed a great deal of the congregation's time and energy in compensating for its absence and working for its restoration. However, it also functioned as a spur to engage with the local community in the rebuilding process. Yet, the fact of the burnt remains of the church building elicited mixed responses from neighbors. Some local residents objected to the continuing ruined appearance of the church's house of worship and suggested that the building be razed to the ground. On the occasion of the work party that I helped with, a local resident accosted me (assuming I was a member of the church) and complained about the charred timbers placed outside the trailer adjacent to the sidewalk as a reminder of the fire. The ugly fact of the fire that destroyed most of the church building was an inconvenient truth responsible for a perceived blot on the landscape, which some residents, at least,

objected to. My chance encounter suggests that not all local people could see beyond the ruins to value the persistence of the church as a community of faith.

Nevertheless, charred by fire and open to the elements, First Baptist's building bore mute witness to the inclusive love believed to be central to the nature of God and the ministry of Jesus, but words were added, as well. The slogan "Many Cultures, One Faith" was displayed on banners attached to the exterior of the original building and the trailer unit hired to serve as a temporary home for the congregation. And when the church decided to become Welcoming and Affirming, this description was added to the exterior of the trailer, its official literature, and website.

In a world shaped by electronic media, the church employs its website as a tool to communicate its diverse and inclusive nature. Pictures of people from the congregation drawn from the diversity of ethnic groups represented in it are displayed on the website and convey an impression of the rich mix of people that make up the congregation at First Baptist. The unspoken message broadcast visually is that diversity is valued and nobody is excluded from becoming a part of First Baptist Church in Jamaica Plain.

In the summer months, Sunday services were held under a red and white striped marquee on the lawn next to the trailer and adjacent to the sidewalk. The church took its Sunday worship outside the four walls of the trailer to worship God in the open-air. A children's summer project met mid-week on the lawn under the marquee and the church meeting that decided the issue of whether or not to become a Welcoming and Affirming congregation convened in this space, as well. Here the

very identity and mission of the church was symbolically open and accessible to the general public.

At the time of research, First Baptist ran few church initiated social action projects, which is understandable given the limited facilities available to the church, modest size of the congregation, and the energy, time, and resources required to rebuild the premises. Ashlee Wiest-Laird concentrated mostly on encouraging people to be salt and light where they are, to partner with others in making Jamaica Plain a better place to live. The decision to become Welcoming and Affirming represents a step in the direction of becoming a community of radical inclusiveness and demonstrates that First Baptist practices what it preaches. Wiest-Laird's commitment to social justice constitutes a new message in the context of First Baptist (with some antecedents such as the letter about slavery recently discovered). First Baptist has been more accustomed to Golden Rule Christianity where the priority is on caring for people within the congregation or people closely associated with it. Now, a pastor is leading First Baptist with an aspiration for it to become a social activist church.

Worship and Mission at Ruggles Baptist Church

Our purpose is to be a community of believers in Jesus Christ that worships God and enables one another, by the power of the Holy Spirit, to glorify God and expand his Kingdom.[25]

The Worship Service

Ruggles Baptist Church gathers to praise God Sunday by Sunday in an auditorium designed for Unitarian worship. The interior of the worship area is bright and spacious with walls painted a creamy white. Expansive windows admit large amounts of natural light. The high ceiling is decorated with gold-colored moldings and impressive chandelier type lighting is suspended from the ceiling. A plain silver cross adorns the wall behind a raised platform area at the front of the sanctuary. Pews arranged in two columns with a central aisle separating them face towards the front from where the service is conducted.

On entering the sanctuary stewards hand out copies of the weekly bulletin and New International Version of the Bible to worshippers. A picture of the Boston city skyline viewed from the sea is displayed on a data projector screen with the words "Welcome to Boston and Ruggles Baptist Church" superimposed. The weekly bulletin sets out a skeleton outline of the service and is normally accompanied by a separate insert that includes a brief summary of the key points of the sermon and space to make notes on a separate insert. No hymnbook is handed out and the words of songs are not printed in the weekly bulletin. All words for songs used in

[25] Mission Statement Ruggles Baptist Church, *The Beacon Light*, September 2006, 1.

congregational worship are displayed on a single screen via a data projector using a power point presentation prepared ahead of the service.[26] The absence of any need to hold a hymnbook during public worship frees people to clap or raise hands and, inevitably, means that the screen at the front of the worship areas is a focus of attention during Sunday worship. A band of musicians is located on ground level immediately in front of a raised platform area. The group occupies a central position at the front and normally includes a bass guitar, acoustic guitar, drums, pianist, and two or three singers.

A worshipper that arrives early is likely to find the music group practicing songs ahead of the service. People cluster together in small groups of two or three in the pews and talk with one another before the service begins. Sometimes recorded music is played for five or ten minutes prior to the start of the service. The pastor, Larry Showalter, usually leads Sunday morning worship. He typically wears smart-casual attire, a style reflected in the congregation as a whole. The general ethos and feel of the service is one of informality. The pastor will normally extend a welcome to the congregation, particularly to people visiting Ruggles for the first time. A passage of Scripture is often used as a call to worship and then the congregation stands to sing a block of songs lead by the music group. Relationships and knowing the identities of the people with whom one is worshipping are highly valued in the context of public worship. Consequently, people in the congregation are invited to

[26] The preparation of the weekly power point for a Sunday service is a time consuming exercise.

greet one another. The notices and offering follow the exchange of greeting and then prayer is offered for the children before they leave for age appropriate classes. It is usual for one passage of Scripture to be read in the course of a morning service, which then supplies the basis of the sermon. A final song or selection of songs then concludes the morning service.

Sermons

Four people preached sermons at Ruggles in the four months from September to December. Larry Showalter preached fifteen sermons, two church members preached one sermon each, and a former student pastor delivered the message on one occasion. A consistent theological perspective was reflected in the preaching throughout the fall and winter months at Ruggles. The four preachers shared a common evangelical theological framework transmitted and reinforced through evangelical institutions such as Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, Inter-Varsity Fellowship, Campus Crusade for Christ, and local churches. Each of the four preachers professed a conversion experience and personal faith in Jesus Christ grounded in a conscious and intentional decision to receive the forgiveness of sins in response to the message of the Gospel.

The sermon series preached from September to December 2006 went under the title "Pursuit of Spiritual Authenticity" within which four doctrinal themes or convictions are apparent: God loves human beings and seeks relationship with them (the nature and purpose of God), human beings are separated from God by sin (the

human condition), Jesus Christ died to make it possible for human beings to enter into a relationship with God (the person and work of Jesus Christ), and we must believe in Jesus Christ to enter into eternal relationship with God (the Christian life). These four themes echo the principles of the Four Spiritual Laws associated with Campus Crusade for Christ,[27] which are of fundamental importance to Larry Showalter's theology and practice.

Sermons preached under the heading "Pursuit of Spiritual Authenticity" explored the theme of authentic spiritual life through an examination of Old Testament prophets. The overarching story or meta-narrative into which each sermon fitted was the Biblical story of a God perpetually seeking to reconcile wayward humanity to divine fellowship, initially through the people of Israel and supremely in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Although the sermons in this series were based on Old Testament events and characters, a connection was always made with the New Testament witness to Jesus Christ.

The Nature and Purpose of God

God's desire to be central to our lives is the key theme of the preaching at Ruggles. Sermons consistently presented God seeking an intimate relationship with us to provide meaning and security in our lives. To this end God is relentless in his pursuit to establish a relationship with each individual human being. A two-part sermon, "Elijah: Holding Steady in a Roller Coaster World" (September 17 and 24)

[27] For the importance of Campus Crusade for Christ to Larry Showalter's theology and practice see Chapter Four.

used the story of the prophet Elijah (I Kings 15:25-19:18) to illustrate how the Old Testament portrays God refusing to give up on the people of Israel, even though they persistently rebel against God. The Old Testament warns about the dire consequences that follow when human beings turn to evil things. God does not necessarily rescue the people of God out of adversity and troubles, but always remains faithfully present with them. The privilege of receiving revelation carries with it a challenge to respond. Divine love calls the people of God to be faithful. Double-mindedness is a threat to right relationship with God and hinders growth in the life of faith. Idolatry or putting one's trust in a person or thing other than God is a constant threat to authentic relations with God. The law of God makes human beings aware of sin and shows that they are in need of forgiveness. However, the Old Testament makes clear that despite Israel's constant rebellion God does not give up on Israel, nor, indeed, on all the nations of the world. God's persevering love is manifested most clearly in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Critically, the work of Jesus Christ on the cross is final and decisive; it is finished. Human beings can add nothing to the finished work of Jesus Christ, who is the truth in an absolute sense and the only way to God. Hence, spiritual health depends on saying, "Yes" to Jesus, following his call to discipleship and acknowledging him as Savior and Lord.

The Human Condition

Sin is rebellion against God, a rejection of God's sovereign purpose and will, and a barrier to right relation with God. As such, sin defines the human predicament.

We are estranged from God and lack the capacity to overcome sin in our lives. Sin tends to blunt our sense of sin, inculcates self-deception, and instills complacency in the human heart. Worshippers are exhorted to examine their "hearts" (the orientation and disposition of their lives) before God honestly and carefully. A sequence of sermons preached from Isaiah over the first three Sundays in December wrestled with the problem of human sin and its reality as a threat to human wellbeing. "Isaiah the Prophet: A Child, Who is God, Born to Die" [28] (December 3) argued the heart of a person is the source of sin and rebellion that threatens authentic spiritual life. In "Immanuel: A Name for Fearful Times"[29] (December 10) Showalter argued that human fears and sinful ways need to acknowledge God is with us and instead of pursuing life independently trust God and wait for God's guidance. The sermon on December 17, "Unpredictable"[30] reflected that God acts in unexpected ways. God uses the people we least expect God to entrust with tasks and Jesus is no exception. He does what is unpredictable, associating with sinners, spending time with children, submitting to death so that we might live, and even forgives his executioners. Jesus defeats death and the punishment for sins, and so saves us from our sins. The unexpected coming of Jesus is cause to celebrate and give thanks to God.

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[28] Based on Isaiah 9:1-7 and 53:1-6.

[29] Based on Isaiah 7-8 with reference to Matthew 1:22-23, and John 3:17.

[30] Based on Isaiah 53:2-3 with reference to Luke 2:6-7, 8-12, Matthew 1:21, and 1 Corinthians 15:52-53.

The Christian Life

At Ruggles, Showalter, in classic Baptist fashion, wrestles with the individual soul through the sermon. The premise that each individual human being is significant and loved by God runs like a thread through the preaching from September to December and the sermons nearly always concentrate on the condition of an individual's relationship with God. As one church member observed of Larry Showalter, "Well, I don't know if you've noticed recently … all he's preaching about is your relationship with God. He takes every scripture and turns it [to] your relationship with God. Which I think is, basically, what he's preached about for the last 20 years in some shape or other." A constant assumption in the sermons preached at Ruggles during my time as a participant observer is that the human heart yearns for meaning and the security of being loved and forgiven by God. In this respect, the preaching reflected a deeply personal concern of Larry Showalter (a need to be unconditionally loved and accepted by God), a critical ingredient of the Baptist and Evangelical traditions[31] that have shaped Ruggles and locate salvation in the "solitary self,"[32] and the insight of Augustine that "Our hearts find no peace until they rest in you."[33] Accepting Jesus Christ as Savior entails living under his Lordship. In

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[31] Historically, Baptist theology and piety is conversionist to the core. See B. J. Leonard, "Getting Saved in America: Conversion Event in a Pluralistic Culture," *Review and Expositor* 82, no. 1 (1985): 111-127; Mark S. Medley, "A Good Work Spoiled? Revisiting Baptist Soteriology," in *Recycling the Past or Researching History? Studies in Baptist Historiography and Myths*, ed. Philip E. Thomson and Anthony R. Cross (Bletchley, Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2005), 84-105.

[32] Medley, "A Good Work Spoiled," 85.

[33] Augustine, *Confessions I:1*, trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin (London: Penguin, 1961), 21.

practice, living under the rule of Jesus Christ means offering praise to God for the gift of salvation in a spirit of gratitude and living in obedience to the divine will that Jesus Christ makes known.

Jesus Christ

The sermon preached on September 3, the first Sunday of my period as a participant observer at Ruggles, concluded a series entitled "Lives Jesus Touched" and centered on Jesus' encounter with Zacchaeus the tax collector (Luke 19:1-10). Luke 19:10 supplied the key text, "For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost." The basic idea of the sermon is that Jesus came to bring you and all that you are into relationship with him. The individual man or woman is asked to consider if he or she is looking to be found by Jesus and prepared to let him into his or her private life and experience. Showalter read an extract from a song, "If Jesus Came to Your House", to illustrate the challenge of letting Jesus into an individual's private world:

> *If Jesus Came to Your House*
> If Jesus came to your house to spend a day or two
> If He came without warning, I wonder what you'd do.
> Oh, I know you'd give your nicest room to such an honored Guest,
> And all the food you'd serve to him would be the very best,
> And you would keep assuring Him, you're glad to have Him there
> That serving Him in your home is a joy beyond compare.
> But-when you saw Him coming, would you meet Him at the door
> With arms outstretched in welcome to your Heavenly Visitor?
> Or would you have to change your clothes before you let Him in?
> Or hide some magazines and put the Bible where they'd been?
> Would you turn off the radio-and hope he hadn't heard? And wish

> You hadn't uttered that last loud, hasty word?
> Would you hide your worldly music and put some hymnbooks out?
> Could you let Jesus walk right in, or would you rush about?[34]

The questions to the congregation continue. "What are you like in private? Can you allow Jesus into your private world? What about what you do at night? The programs you watch? The websites you visit? The magazines you read? If Jesus came to your house to spend his life with you, what would you do? In his encounter with Zacchaeus, Jesus declares that salvation has come to his house. Salvation, it is explained, means to heal and refers to the whole of life. Jesus is intent on seeking and saving the lost. He is looking for those who are lost and want to be found. The sermon concludes with an opportunity for individuals to accept Jesus Christ as Savior and commit their lives to him:

> Heavenly Father: I come to you in prayer asking for the forgiveness of my sins. I confess with my mouth and believe with my heart that Jesus is your Son, and that he died on the cross that I might be forgiven and have Eternal Life in the Kingdom of Heaven. Father, I believe that Jesus rose from the dead and I ask you right now to come into my life and be my personal Savior. I invite Jesus to become Lord of my life, to rule and reign in my heart from this day forward. Please send your Holy Spirit to help me love You, and to do Your will for the rest of my life. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

The prayer envisages an individual supplicant directing an appeal to God the Father, asking God for the forgiveness of sins and to be the supplicant's personal Savior. Three doctrinal affirmations are made about Jesus Christ. First, Jesus is acknowledged to be God's Son. Second, Jesus died that the individual supplicant

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[34] Words supplied by Larry Showalter in sermon manuscript. The song is attributed to Lois Blanchard Eades.

might be forgiven and receive eternal life. Third, Jesus rose from the dead. Then the supplicant makes a statement about inviting Jesus to become "Lord of my life" with authority to "rule and reign" over him or her from that point onwards. Interestingly, the prayer makes statements about Jesus rather than directing speech to Jesus. God the Father is asked to send the Holy Spirit to help the supplicant live the kind of life that is obedient to the divine will. Finally, the prayer is offered in the name of Jesus. Throughout this prayer designed for a penitent sinner, God the Father is presumed to be the agent at work in Jesus' death and resurrection in the past and through the Holy Spirit in the present. Jesus stands in a unique relation to God as God's Son and is by implication alive today by virtue of rising from the dead. The concepts of sin, eternal life, Jesus' relation to God as Son, and the nature of the resurrection are nowhere explained in the sermon that precedes the prayer. The prayer, although offered with evangelistic intent, is, in effect, only comprehensible to people that understand the key concepts utilized. Insiders familiar with the language might be challenged to deepen their faith and to submit their lives more fully under the direction of Jesus' Lordship. Perhaps somebody curious about Christianity that has begun to ask questions and is already familiar with concepts such as sin and eternal life might seize upon such a prayer to make a decisive and conscious commitment to become a Christian. But the content of the sermon might seem alien and strange to anybody unfamiliar with the story of Jesus and the Christian message.

A prominent theme in the sermons preached in Advent is that Jesus fulfils a promise made by God centuries ago in the Old Testament period through the prophet

Isaiah to the people of Israel. The message God entrusted to Isaiah was directed to the prophet's own generation, but carried a significance that transcended it. Isaiah perceived and anticipated the coming of God among human beings in Jesus Christ. God worked with a purpose and a plan across centuries to enter into human life in Jesus Christ. Christmas is a celebration of the fulfillment of God's promise in the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The doctrine of the Incarnation also featured strongly in Advent. "Immanuel", the name attributed to Jesus of Nazareth, means "God with us". Jesus Christ is God in the flesh. The three sermons that concentrated on Isaiah in December 2006 also addressed the theme of Jesus as the God/Man or God in the flesh. Indeed, the doctrinal claim that Jesus is God with us was made, but the metaphysical implications of the story that God was in some sense in Jesus Christ were not explored. None of the sermons unpacked how God might be present in Jesus or what such a claim might imply for our understanding of God. The sermons primarily concentrated on the implications of the Incarnation for our lives, "Our fears and our sinful ways need to give way to the truth that God is with us, and if God is with us, how then shall we live?"[35]

In the sermon "Amos: Feeling Marginalized, On the Edge?" (November 5) Showalter noted that Jesus summed up the Old Testament Law in two commandments. The first was to love God with all your heart and the second was to

[35] Larry Showalter, "Immanuel: A Name for Fearful Times" (December 10, 2006).

love your neighbor as yourself.[36] As the congregation worked through the prophets of the Old Testament he explained it would be important to remember that these fundamental teachings are the moral and spiritual foundation abandoned by the people of Israel, and constitute the Judeo-Christian base, which is vital for keeping "society civil" in the United States. The erosion of the Judeo-Christian inheritance accounts for the "increasing barbaric behavior demonstrated in our society." The abandonment of these basic principle or truths in Amos' generation resulted in behavior that oppressed the weak and perpetuated injustice. The same challenge presents itself to the followers of Jesus Christ today. They also can be tempted to abandon God and God's design for life. Showalter urged the congregation, "Add intensity to your pursuit of God. . . . Become determined that you are going to pursue the living God in the face of whatever is staring you down." The emphasis within the sermon is not principally about challenging systemic injustice in church or society but instead stresses the importance of the individual staying focused on God. It is striking that the kingdom of God does not feature in the exposition of prophetic literature through the Fall and Winter at Ruggles, even in the material that makes connections with the teaching of Jesus. The final sermon of the year, "Is the Spirit on You?"[37] (December 31), set out an agenda for the preaching in 2007 and announced that followers of Jesus are kingdom people. People who live in the kingdom of God are conscious of

[36] Jesus' teaching summed up in the commands to love God with all that you are and to love your neighbor as yourself were reiterated in the sermon preached on November 5, "Micah: What God Expects of Us".

[37] Based on Isaiah 61:1-11.

the presence of the Holy Spirit in their lives. They experience healing, interpreted by Showalter as enjoying an intense relationship with God. It appears that the kingdom of God, like the death of Jesus upon the cross, is essentially about the relation of the individual to God.

Sermons addressing the death of Jesus for the forgiveness of sins included "Hosea: A Living Illustration of God's Love"[38] (October 29) and the series preached on Isaiah in December: "Isaiah the Prophet: A Child Who is God, Born to die" (December 3), "Immanuel: A Name for Fearful Times" (December 10), and "Unpredictable" (December 17). The doctrine of God undergirds the exposition of Jesus' atoning death in the sermons at Ruggles. God is a God of love, but also a God of justice. Hence, God because of God's very nature cannot ignore the fact of sin. Human rebellion accrues a "debt" that must be "paid" in order to release a sinner from the power and penalty of sin, namely, eternal separation from God. It was necessary, therefore, for somebody to pay the price of sin, but satisfying the price of sin is beyond human capacities. God alone can deal with the problem of sin. God freely chose to pay the price for sins in the person and work of Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God who became a human being in accordance with the will of God the Father. Since Jesus was God with us, it is possible for him to do what God alone can do and the very thing that is beyond human beings to accomplish. Jesus Christ paid the debt of sin through his death on the cross and removed sin as a barrier between God and human beings.

[38] Based on Hosea and 2 Kings 17:7-20.

Jesus' unique identity as God/Man and his atoning work upon the cross are relevant to all peoples. He came to bring people into relationship with God. This was his purpose during his earthly ministry and remains true today. The crucified and risen Jesus enables people to enter into an authentic and eternal relationship with God. Two absolute claims were made about Jesus Christ in the course of the sermons preached from September to December 2006. First, Jesus is the only way to God. Salvation or right relationship with God is to be found in Jesus Christ alone. A consequence of this assumption about Jesus and salvation is that pluralism is not an option for followers of Jesus Christ. Not all roads lead to heaven. Christians must, therefore, be alert to the dangers of idolatry or substitutes for God. Second, Jesus is truth in an absolute sense, an assertion unequivocally made in "Elijah: Holding Steady in a Roller Coaster World" (September 17). Jesus, therefore, is the measure of what is true and what is false. The story of Jesus is a story with universal significance. Thus, conversion to Christ is essential to know God. A key element in sermons at First Baptist is a desire to persuade hearers to put their faith in Jesus Christ and so enter into a personal and eternal relationship with God.

The sermons at First Baptist during the period of participant observation exhorted hearers to put their faith in Jesus Christ and assumed his risen presence was available and accessible. Yet, the resurrection was explicitly confessed only occasionally, for example, in the prayer used on September 3 at the end of the sermon, and again at the end of the sermon preached at the carol service on Christmas Eve (December 24). Overall, the resurrection of Jesus was implicitly presupposed

rather than unambiguously proclaimed in the sermons preached from September to December. The proximity of Advent and Christmas meant that the emphasis in sermons was placed on the birth of Jesus and the theme of Incarnation as the fulfillment of Old Testament promise and God's provision to reconcile human beings to fellowship with the divine. Unlike the cross and the atoning significance of Jesus' death, the resurrection and its meaning did not receive much attention. The impression conveyed over the four months of participant observation is that everything necessary to salvation is contained in the cross of Jesus.

A further significant christological theme in the sermons at Ruggles is that Jesus is the supreme example of how to live as a human being before God. A former student pastor preached on the occasion of celebrating twenty-five years of Larry Showalter's ministry at Ruggles. Preaching from Hebrews 12:1-3 the sermon title declared, "Jesus is Our Ultimate Example" (October 15). Jesus was fully obedient to the will of God even to the extent of dying upon a cross for the sake of human beings. Although Jesus Christ stared death in the face, he was able to look beyond it to a future joy. Jesus models a pattern of life for his disciples to follow. He exemplifies a humble, self-denying, and persevering love for others that is completely obedient to God. Jesus shows us how to trust and obey God as a human being.

Songs in Worship

Ruggles Baptist Church utilizes a contemporary style of music in its weekly worship service. The overwhelming majority of the songs used in public worship

throughout the fall and early winter of 2006 were composed in the previous two decades (1985 – 2005). North American composers such as Brian Doerksen (Canada), David Ruis (United States), and Mark Altrogge (United States) wrote most of the songs with a sprinkling of material composed by British musicians including Graham Kendrick, Tim Hughes, and Matt Redman. Congregational worship does not depend upon a hymnbook. Instead songs selected for use in public worship are drawn from a wide range of sources and displayed on a screen by a data projector linked to a lap top computer.

The weekly service at Ruggles opens with a block of praise and worship songs intended to enable an intimate and intense experience of God. Two broad themes surface repeatedly in the songs used in worship, the awesome character of God and the glory of the exalted Lord Jesus Christ.[39] The emphasis within many songs is upon the individual and his or her relationship with God/Jesus. They begin from the solitude of an isolated self and approach God/Jesus as one that inspires unbridled joy or else overcomes an individual's despair or sense of helplessness. There is little sense of belonging to a corporate body or community of faith conveyed in the songs sung at Ruggles.[40] To get a flavor of the range of songs sung in public worship at

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[39] The results reported in "Living with Jesus" echo those reported by James H. S. Steven, *Worship in the Spirit: Charismatic Worship in the Church of England* (Bletchley, Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2002), 91-134.

[40] For a penetrating analysis of contemporary worship music see Michelle K. Baker Wright, "Intimacy and Orthodoxy: Evaluating Existing Paradigms of Contemporary Worship Music," *Missiology: An International Review* 35, no. 2 (2007): 169-178. A helpful analysis of renewal music from the 1970s and 1980s appears in Jeremy Begbie, "The Spirituality of Renewal Music: A Preliminary Exploration," *Anvil* 8, no. 3 (1991): 227-239.

Ruggles it is helpful to categorize them. They can be divided into three broad groups.[41] The largest segment of songs explicitly praised God the Father. The next most common type of song was ambiguous and did not make clear exactly which person in the Godhead was being referred to. Robin Parry calls these "You Lord" songs.[42] Finally, the third most prominent category of song praised or made reference to Jesus Christ directly. This type of song includes "I'm Forever Grateful" and "My Savior, My God" and advances a cluster of christological themes: the pre-existence of Jesus Christ, his deity, his humility in assuming humanity, the work of the cross to save lost humanity from its sin, Jesus Christ's risen and exalted status worthy of praise and honor, and the love of Jesus Christ that seeks out and embraces the individual. These songs are about "Jesus and me". Quite simply, Jesus meets the need of the individual singing the song to be forgiven and accepted. He gives the individual believer strength to face his or her fears and challenges in life:

I'm Forever Grateful
You did not wait for me, to draw near to You
But You clothed yourself in frail humanity.
You did not wait for me, to cry out to You
But You let me hear Your voice calling me …

And I'm forever grateful to You
I'm forever grateful for the cross
I'm forever grateful to You
That You came to seek and save the lost.

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[41] A useful categorization and analysis of contemporary worship songs can be found in Robin Parry, *Worshipping Trinity: Coming Back to the Heart of Worship* (Bletchley, Milton Keynes: Paternoster Press, 2005), 122-159.

[42] Ibid., 140-142.

You did not wait for me, to come back to You
But You spread Your arms and died a death for me.
You did not wait for me, to face my fears alone
But you came and held me in Your Loving arms…

My Savior, My God
I am not skilled to understand
What God has willed, what God has planned
I only know at his right hand
Stands one who is my Savior
I take Him at His word and deed
Christ died to save me this I read
And in my heart I find a need
Of Him to be my Savior

That he would leave His place on high
And come for sinful man to die
You count it strange, so once did I
Before I knew my Savior

My Savior lives, my Savior lives
My Savior's always there for me
My God, He was, my God, He is
My God is always gonna be

Yes, living, dying, let me bring
My strength, my solace from this spring
That He who lives to be my King
Once died to be my Savior

A striking feature of the worship songs employed at Ruggles is that relatively few make explicit reference to the cross.[43] Often, the worshipper needed to be familiar with the Gospel story of Jesus and his passion in order to recognize an

[43] "I'm Forever Grateful" (September 3), "My Savior, My God" (September 3), "Sing to the King" (October 29, "Untitled Hymn" (November 5), and "Here I am to worship" (November 5).

allusion to the cross. For example, describing Jesus as the "Lamb of God"[44] or the "Lamb that/who was slain"[45] is a common way of indicating the cross in a lot of songs. The death of Jesus is connected with the forgiveness of sins, but otherwise no theory of atonement is expressed in any of the songs. Not one song focuses on the suffering and death of Jesus in detail. The paucity of explicit reference to the central event of the cross is a notable omission since the death of Jesus is a key theme in the preaching from the pulpit and, as will be shown in Chapter Six, very significant in the everyday theologies of people in the congregation.[46]

A key christological theme in the songs sung at Ruggles is that the earthly life and ministry of Jesus function as an example to follow. The songs "Knowing You" (September 3) and "Humble King" (November 19) celebrate the humble service, self-giving love, and death of Jesus as worthy of imitation. Each song expresses a desire to be like Jesus. Graham Kendrick's "Knowing You" links the theme of imitating the earthly life and ministry of Jesus with the joy and blessing of knowing the risen Jesus, and acknowledges that following Jesus results in a radically different orientation in life:

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[44] See the songs "Salvation Belongs to Our God" (September 24), "You are Holy" (December 3), and "How Great is Our God" (December 16).

[45] See the songs "Sing to the King" (October 29) and "Be Unto Your Name" (November 5).

[46] See Chapter Six.

Knowing You
All I once held dear, built my life upon,
All this world reveres and wars to own;
All I once thought gain I have counted loss,
Spent and worthless now compared to this

Chorus:
Knowing You, Jesus, knowing You
There is no greater thing.
You're my all, You're the best,
You're my joy, my righteousness,
And I love You Lord.

Now my heart's desire is to know You more,
To be found in You and be known as Yours,
To possess by faith what I could not earn
All surpassing gift of righteousness

Chorus

Oh to know the power of Your risen life,
And to know You in Your sufferings;
To become like You in Your death, my Lord,
So with You to live and never die

Chorus

Humble King
Oh kneel me down again,
Here at Your feet
Show me how much you love humility
Oh Spirit be the star that leads me to
The humble heart of love I see in You

You are the God of the broken
The friend of the weak
You wash the feet of the weary
Embrace the ones in need
I want to be like You, Jesus
To have this heart in me
You are the God of the humble
You are the humble King

The theme of being embraced and comforted by God/Jesus is an important feature of the contemporary music sung at Ruggles.[47] Nowhere is this more explicit than in the song "Draw me Close" (September 3), a "You Lord" composition that celebrates the divine embrace of the individual believer:

Draw Me Close
Draw me close to you
Never let me go
I lay it all down again
To hear you say that I'm your friend

You are my desire
No one else will do
'Cause nothing else could take your place
To feel the warmth of your embrace
Help me find the way, bring me back to you

Chorus:
You're all I want
You're all I've ever needed
You're all I want
Help me know you are near
Draw me close to you
Never let me go
I'll lay it all down again
To hear you say that I'm your friend

You are my desire
No one else will do
'Cause no one else could take your place
I feel the warmth of Your embrace
Help me find the way
Lead me back to you

[47] See also "I'm forever grateful" (September 3), "Power of Your Love" (October 29), "Humble King" (November 19), and "Our Great God" (December 3).

You're all I want
You're all I've ever needed
You're all I want
Help me know you are near

The story that emerges from the songs is that of an eternal God who created the world and sent his pre-existent Son to the earth in the human life of Jesus to die to save human beings from their sins. Jesus who died on the cross is now alive and exalted in heaven. Songs of worship at Ruggles accentuate the pre-existence and divine dignity of the eternal Son, the death of Jesus upon the cross, his risen exalted life, and powerful love that inspires joy and puts to flight all human fear, weakness, brokenness, and loneliness. The songs used in corporate worship at Ruggles make doctrinal claims about Jesus Christ and so echo ancient ecumenical creeds and modern evangelical confessions of faith, which stress the incarnation, deity, death, and present Lordship of Jesus Christ, and tend to omit reference to his earthly ministry and teaching. Significant elements of Jesus' humanity are lost from view. The contemporary Christian music employed at Ruggles reflects contemporary Western cultural trends by focusing on the individual self and stressing the therapeutic or healing power of divine love in the risen Jesus that can satisfy the deepest needs and solve the most painful problems. The risk and costly nature of Christian discipleship is glimpsed only fleetingly in public worship at Ruggles.

In summary, the songs sung at Ruggles Baptist Church were framed in terms of the relationship between the individual and God. Few songs recognized the corporate nature of the church and the Christian life. The songs assume the individual

self is isolated and in need of healing. God or the exalted Jesus alone is the solution to individual needs for security, forgiveness, and wholeness. God/Jesus is portrayed as all sufficient and adequate to the needs of the individual.

Mission as Evangelism (Most of the Time)

Ruggles Baptist Church is committed to witnessing to the message of salvation in Jesus Christ. Mission is conceived primarily as evangelism, enacted as the verbal proclamation of the Gospel (Good News) of Jesus Christ, although hints of a more holistic approach to mission can be found in the history and contemporary life of the church. The formative history of Ruggles demonstrates a commitment to social action to relieve poverty as well as an emphasis on evangelism to secure personal salvation. In the 1990s, Ruggles echoed previous generations of witness when it started a food pantry in the basement of the church building under the name "Bread of Life Food Pantry" that operated for almost ten years. The food pantry had to be discontinued when the basement flooded and was no longer fit for that purpose. More recently, hospitality has been a key practice. Ruggles has worked hard to extend hospitality to international students and hosted ethnic minority congregations that need space to worship and conduct congregational activities. An attempt is also being made to engage with the local High School student population in Brookline. A church member is employed as a youth worker specializing in outreach to High School students with a particular concern to address problems associated with drugs.

Ruggles currently witnesses to the Gospel of Jesus Christ through the physical presence of its building (being the only house of worship on the section of Beacon Street leading to downtown Boston), public worship (including open air baptisms), a virtual presence through its website, occasional use of the Alpha Course, partnership with Cultural Connection that offers ministry to international students studying at Boston University, support of a part-time Youth Worker focusing on High School students, and organizing short-term mission trips from within the congregation.

In the half-decade stretching from 1999 to 2005, the Alpha Course was a key element in the corporate mission of Ruggles. Many of the congregation participated in the Alpha Course. For the most part, it appears to have reinforced teaching about Jesus Christ previously imbibed in the experience of believers. Alpha is a process-evangelism program that provides a basic introduction to Christianity in the context of a shared meal and informal conversation.[48] Alpha seeks to present an apologetic (credible) basis for Christianity and offers instruction on basic Christian teachings over fifteen sessions. It also aims to facilitate the experiential dimension of the Christian life, especially through its emphasis upon the person and work of the Holy Spirit. Session One asks, "Christianity: Boring, True, Irrelevant?" and aims to counter three common objections to the Christian faith.[49] At the very outset of the

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[48] First Baptist in Jamaica Plain used L*i*ving the Questions, a process-evangelism course based on a DVD presentation of Christianity devised as a more progressive option than the conservative Alpha Course. Living the Questions was cheekily marketed as "An Unapologetically Liberal Alternative to Alpha" when it first appeared.

[49] Nicky Gumbel, *Questions of Life* (Eastbourne: Kingsway Publications, 1993), 11-22.

Alpha Course, Jesus is introduced as the one in whom human beings find fullness of life. "In Jesus we find life where previously there has been guilt, addiction, fear and the prospect of death. . . .We all need forgiveness and only in Christ can it be found."[50] Jesus is the solution to the human problem of a life tarnished by sin, the things we have done wrong. He died "to pay the penalty for all things that we have done wrong."[51] But Jesus did not simply die for human beings. He also rose from the dead and in so doing defeated death. The purpose of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection was so that we might have eternal life. "Eternal life is a quality of life which comes from living in relationship with God and Jesus Christ (John 17:3)."[52]

The Alpha Course devotes the second and third sessions to Jesus Christ. Session Two asks, "Who is Jesus?"[53] Alpha stresses that Jesus Christ existed as a real historical figure and that he was conscious of being divine. Jesus claimed that the only way to encounter God was through a relationship with him (John 14:6). Alpha relies heavily upon the "1 am" sayings of the Gospel according to John to make the case for Jesus claiming an identity with God. The human heart is restless and hungry for God. Jesus alone can satisfy the human hunger for God (John 6:35). Many people are walking around lost and without direction. Jesus claims to be the "light of the world" (John 8:12). Many people are afraid of death. Jesus claims to be the

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[50] Gumbel, *Questions of Life*, 18-19.

[51] Ibid., 19.

[52] Ibid., 22.

[53] Ibid., 41.

source of life beyond death (John 11:25-26). Jesus can relieve people of burdens, anxiety, and guilt (Matthew 11:28). In effect, Jesus said that if you want to know what God is like look at me. Further, Jesus made indirect references to an identity with God by claiming to forgive sins (Matthew Mark 2:5) and judge the world (Matthew 25:40).

Jesus claimed to be the unique Son of God, God made flesh. Gumbel employs C. S. Lewis's rationale that Jesus must be a liar, lunatic, or who he claimed to be. To support the assertion that Jesus really was truly divine, Gumbel appeals to five types of evidence: his teaching, his works, his character, his fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy, and his resurrection.

Session three addresses the question, "Why did Jesus die?" Alpha answers that the human predicament necessitated the death of Jesus. Humans are estranged from God as a result of sin, which has four consequences. Sin makes human beings unclean before God (Mark 7:20-23). Sin exercises a grip on human existence (John 8:34). Sin carries a penalty; it merits punishment. Indeed, "the wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23). Sin separates us from God now and results in eternal isolation from God (Isaiah 59:1-2).

Sin is a problem to be dealt with in every human life. God has acted in Jesus Christ to remove the barrier of sin that separates him from us. God did not abandon human beings. "He came to earth, in the person of his Son Jesus to die instead of us

(2 Corinthians 5:21; Galatians 3:13)."[54] Gumbel borrows a phrase from John Stott to describe this process as "the self-substitution of God."[55] Jesus came as a substitute for us. He was crucified for us and experienced rejection at the hands of the world, desertion by his friends, and separation from God the Father. The results of the cross are explained with reference to three biblical images. The first image, justification, is derived from the law court. "Justification is a legal term. If you went to court and were acquitted, you were justified."[56] The second image comes from the market place. A man carrying debt might offer himself for sale as a slave in the market place. Somebody might ask how much he owed and offer to pay the debt for him. In paying the debt the customer would, in effect, "redeem" the man by paying a "ransom price". According to the New Testament, "redemption" came in Jesus Christ (Romans 3:24). "Jesus, by his death on the cross paid the ransom price (Mark 10:45)."[57] The death of Jesus sets people free from the power of sin. It is not that sin is erased, but it no longer needs to have the final say in our lives. The third image is associated with the Temple. Through the sacrificial system in the Old Testament provision was made to recognize the seriousness of sin and the need to be cleansed from it. However, the blood of animals cannot take away sin from our lives (Hebrews 10:4). "Only the blood of Christ, our substitute, can take away our sin, because he alone was the

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[54] Gumbel, *Questions of Life*, 47.

[55] Ibid.

[56] Ibid., 49.

[57] Ibid., 51.

perfect sacrifice, since he alone lived a perfect life."[58] The fourth image originates in the home. God was at work in Jesus Christ to reconcile the world to Godself (2 Corinthians 5:19). The cross creates the potential of a restored relationship with God. Members interviewed for "Living with Jesus" repeatedly echo the Alpha course's concept of the cross.[59]

The christology of the Alpha course places the accent on a Jesus that is truly divine and dies for the forgiveness of sins. Alpha says little about the earthly Jesus or his teaching about the kingdom of God. The emphasis is on the divine identity of Jesus and his death for sinners, the benefits of which are appropriated by believing in Jesus Christ. Session three ends with a prayer that the participant can pray to enter into a new relationship with God by believing in Jesus Christ as Savior, promising to obey him as Lord, and receiving the Holy Spirit.[60] Although Alpha indicates that Jesus never promises an easy life for his followers, the emphasis throughout is on the fullness of life to be found in Jesus.[61] There is not much sense that following Jesus is a risky venture and will almost certainly result in conflict, adversity, and suffering. It is also striking that an opportunity to place one's faith in Jesus Christ and become his follower is offered so early in the presentation of Christianity, before any teaching on

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[58] Gumbel, *Questions of Life*, 52.

[59] The teaching on the cross in Alpha requires a sinless Jesus, which is explained by his perfection as God made flesh. The needs of salvation shape christology.

[60] Gumbel, *Questions of Life*, 54-55.

[61] Ibid., 22.

what the Christian life entails is offered. A key element throughout Alpha is the importance of a genuine experience or encounter with God. Spiritual authenticity is a core conviction, which is especially evident in the four sessions on the Holy Spirit.[62] The Holy Spirit bestows the power to live for Jesus Christ that is vital in the Christian life.

Cultural Connection of Boston

Ruggles partners with a non-profit organization called Cultural Connection of Boston,[63] which has a full-time worker based mainly on the Boston University Charles River Campus, to offer free services to international graduate students, scholars, and their spouses. These services include the Cultural Connection Class on Friday afternoons at Ruggles during semester time that orients international students to American culture, history, music, politics, government, and everyday language. American graduate students at Ruggles help out with the organization and running of Cultural Connection, extend a friendly welcome, and offer hospitality. Since the demise of Alpha courses at Ruggles, Cultural Connection has become the church's main outlet for evangelism. Students are able to make friends with Americans and fellow internationals and learn about different cultures. They also get an opportunity to develop their conversational skills. The weekly Cultural Connection Classes are supplemented by Monthly International Nights on the second Saturday of every

[62] The Alpha Course places a lot of value on the experience of the Holy Spirit and the gift of speaking in tongues.

[63] The Cultural Connection of Boston website can be found at: www.ccboston.org.

month. Families with children from Ruggles are welcome to participate in these evenings that are designed to be fun. Culture is shared through food (people are invited to bring a national dish), music, birthday piñata, arts, and crafts. Monthly excursions and sports activities are offered that give international students opportunities to experience New England. Activities include apple picking, kayaking, hiking, and visiting places of interest.

Cultural Connection offers Investigative Bible Studies on the Boston University Campus. Many international students at Boston University are in the United States for the first time and are presented with a unique opportunity to encounter the Christian faith. A period of study at Boston University gives a lot of international students their first experience of Christianity and an opportunity to explore what the Christian faith is all about. Investigative Bible Studies enable international students to understand what Christians believe about God, Jesus Christ, evil, suffering, the purpose of life, and practical issues such as money and relationships. A growing body of international students worship at Ruggles on Sunday mornings.

From Congregational Convictions to Everyday Convictions

This chapter has examined in some detail the convictions embedded in the congregational practices of worship and mission at First Baptist Church in Jamaica Plain and Ruggles Baptist Church. The main burden of the christology embedded in worship and mission at First Baptist in Jamaica Plain is Jesus' proclamation of the

kingdom of God. Jesus emerges as a prophetic figure challenging the political and religious authorities of his generation and extending an inclusive hand of friendship to people marginalized from society in First Century Palestine. He dies as the consequence of faithfulness to the kingdom of God, but is vindicated by God in the resurrection. The presence of Jesus with his people is a significant theme in the preaching and hymnody at First Baptist, and is immediately relevant to a congregation working to rebuild a ruined house of worship in the face of numerous obstacles and witnessing to the Gospel as it seeks to partner with people in the local community to make Jamaica Plain a vibrant and safe community to live in where all may flourish. Ashlee Wiest-Laird and Lance Laird are powerful and persuasive advocates of a prophetic christology in the context of the congregational practices of worship and mission at First Baptist. Jesus is interpreted as an advocate of the kingdom of God that challenges injustice in society and demonstrates God's inclusive love for all.

The central concern of the christology embedded in worship and mission at Ruggles Baptist Church is that Jesus died for the forgiveness of sins. Jesus is depicted as a universal savior figure that rescues people from the power and penalty of sin. His death is part of God's purpose to remake relationships with individual human beings. On the cross Jesus does for sinful human beings what they cannot do for themselves and pays the price for the accumulation of human sins. The resurrection demonstrates Jesus' divine identity and since Jesus is alive individuals can experience relationship with God by trusting the risen and exalted Jesus. Consequently, mission is primarily about communicating the Good News of Jesus

Christ to give individual people the opportunity to trust Jesus for salvation, enter into a relationship with God, and follow Jesus as obedient disciples. The pastor at Ruggles, Larry Showalter, consistently stresses that trusting in Jesus is the key to re-connecting with God. He advocates what can be described as an evangelical christology, which emphasizes its continuity with historic doctrinal orthodoxy in affirming the deity of Jesus Christ, understands his death upon the cross to be an action that accomplishes the forgiveness of sins, and looks for a conversion of trusting obedience towards Jesus Christ.

Now that the congregational christologies at First Baptist Church in Jamaica Plain and Ruggles Baptist Church are delineated it is possible to move forward and consider everyday christologies. Chapter Six will proceed to unearth and scrutinize the everyday christological convictions of people that belong to the two congregations featured in "Living with Jesus" to assess the christologies actually operative in the daily experience of ordinary believers.

CHAPTER SIX

LIVING WITH JESUS FROM DAY TO DAY

Different people have different reasons for their interest in Jesus.[1]

Listening to Stories

Barbara Brown Taylor, reflecting on her experience as an Episcopal priest, notes that while she understands why and how the early church developed orthodox beliefs, "The beliefs never seized my heart the way the mysteries [which they point to] did."[2] Furthermore, she did not think she was alone in entertaining such thoughts:

> Both at All Saints' and at Grace-Calvary I had spent hours talking with people who had trouble believing. For some the issue was that they believed *less* than they thought they should about Jesus. They were not troubled by the idea that he may have had two human parents instead of one or that his real presence with his disciples after his death might have been more metaphysical than physical. . . . For others, the issue was that they believed *more* than Jesus. Having beheld his glory, they found themselves running into God's glory all over the place, including places where Christian doctrine said that it should not be. . . . These people not only feared being shunned for their unorthodox narratives, they also feared sharing some of the most powerful things that had ever happened to them with people who might dismiss them.[3]

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[1] Tyrone L. Inbody, *The Many Faces of Christology* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), 19.

[2] Barbara Brown Taylor, *Leaving Church: A Memoir of Faith* (Harper Collins: New York, 2007), 109-110.

[3] Ibid., 110. Italics included in original text.

Taylor is not an isolated example among people that count themselves followers of Jesus in suspecting that orthodox doctrine is somehow too limiting or simply too puzzling and cannot adequately comprehend the mystery of the divine to which it attempts to witness. She speaks not simply for some Episcopalians but also for some Baptists. Nobody veered from orthodox Christian teaching about the deity of Jesus or common evangelical ideas about Jesus' death for the forgiveness of sins at Ruggles Baptist Church. However, approximately half of the people interviewed at First Baptist find the notion that Jesus died for the forgiveness of sins problematic. About a quarter of people interviewed at First Baptist find the doctrine of the resurrection of Jesus bodily from the dead difficult to reconcile with what they believe to be true about how the world normally operates, but simultaneously live with a sense of hope based on a conviction that Jesus is somehow a continuing presence with them.

"Living with Jesus" is interested in the stories of ordinary believers. Listening to ordinary believers permits the researcher to identify the story or stories about Jesus operative in everyday life, distil the convictions about Jesus Christ embedded in such narratives, and discern how such convictions translate into the practices of life and faith. This chapter is, therefore, primarily interested in the autobiographical narratives and practices of ordinary believers at First Baptist Church in Jamaica Plain and Ruggles Baptist Church to establish their content and significance for the life of faith.

Gathering the Data

An inductive approach to researching everyday convictions about Jesus Christ was adopted to gather data for "Living with Jesus". I conducted semi-structured interviews with approximately twenty people from each congregation to gather a selection of autobiographical narratives from First Baptist Church in Jamaica Plain and Ruggles Baptist Church.[4] Interviews varied in duration from an hour to an hour and a half. They were conducted in a range of settings, arranged by mutual agreement between the interviewees and me, including offices at Boston University, the houses of worship occupied by each congregation, and private dwellings. The interview process was designed to prompt interviewees to reflect on the person and place of Jesus Christ in their thinking and actual lives, but also gave participants the opportunity to tell their personal stories and develop themes relating to Jesus Christ that arose out of these narratives. Interviews sought to discover when people first learned about Jesus Christ, what they believed about Jesus Christ, and how Jesus Christ influenced or fitted into their lives today.

The practice of testimony, recounting what God has done through Jesus Christ in the life of an individual or a community, is an ancient one. Yet, for many of the people interviewed for "Living with Jesus" the artificial process of being asked questions about the person and place of Jesus Christ in their lives for inclusion in a scholarly research project was a novel experience and functioned as a catalyst for self-

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[4] Twenty-three people were interviewed at First Baptist Church in Jamaica Plain and twenty-one at Ruggles Baptist Church.

reflection. On several occasions, interviewees expressed appreciation for the opportunity to talk about stories, experiences, and thoughts that otherwise they felt obliged to keep private or simply had no access to any safe forum that would permit them to speak freely. Two people were struck by how rare it is for somebody to listen to them without interrupting.

Interviews were recorded on tape cassette and transcribed. The resulting transcripts were then coded using *Qualifiers*.[5] Three types of everyday christology emerged out of the data generated by interviews with ordinary believers at First Baptist Church in Jamaica Plain and Ruggles Baptist Church. These three sets of convictions about Jesus Christ are designated evangelical christology, exemplarist christology, and prophetic christology. Each type of everyday christology is analyzed according to the rubric of James McClendon's notion of a conviction.

Convictions

James McClendon's concept of a conviction embraces three dimensions: cognitive, volitional, and affective. A conviction is a stable and deeply held belief that makes a claim about what is true, about the nature of reality. It is a way of describing the world intelligibly in a conceptual fashion. However, a conviction, as McClendon understands it, is more than an idea in the abstract and incorporates a volitional element that informs human decision-making. Fundamentally, convictions shape the character and direction of a human life. The true nature of a person or

[5] *Qualifiers* is a qualitative research software program available from the College of Education at the University of Hawaii. See http://hisii.hawaii.edu/qualifiers/qualifiers.html.

community's character translates into concrete choices and actions. Finally, convictions manifest an affective quality or emotional content. They are held passionately and resolutely in the midst of human experience. Consequently, convictions are not easily adopted, modified, or abandoned. "Living with Jesus" does not simply provide cognitive snapshots of core beliefs about Jesus Christ in the everyday lives of ordinary believers, but also maps the volitional and affective dimensions of such beliefs.

Structure

The three types of everyday christology are described and analyzed in turn. Each account begins with the narrative of Jesus Christ peculiar to the everyday christology under consideration, continues with a description of the convictions distilled from this narrative, and includes a reflection on the hermeneutical lens or conceptual framework that influences how the Jesus story is heard. The chapter concludes with an examination of the practices that give expression to everyday christology.

An Overview of Findings

A typology is a heuristic tool to interpret and make sense of a cluster of materials or phenomena that manifest a family likeness but also differ from one another. A type represents an ideal strain that rarely appears as a "pure" form in the

untidy reality of human life.[6] Indeed, the types of everyday christology described in "Living with Jesus" are not hermetically sealed off from one another. It is not uncommon for traits of more than one type of christology to coexistt in an ordinary believer. Such a phenomenon is not surprising when one recognizes that religious worldviews or sets of beliefs tend to be *ad hoc* and eclectic:

> Religious worldviews are not created in a cultural vacuum. Nor are they tightly integrated dogmatic systems. They are better thought of, in fact, as a hodge-podge of beliefs and affirmations, a set of cultural themes and elements often inconsistent in a strict cognitive sense but which blend into a meaningful coherence for the individual believer.[7]

Capturing and conveying the nuances of everyday christologies is, therefore, an important objective of "Living with Jesus" to accurately reflect the complex topography of christological convictions and the dynamic quality of faith in the everyday life of an ordinary believer. Oversimplification is a perennial temptation to be resisted. Nonetheless, a snapshot of each of the three everyday christologies that emerges from the data will help orient the reader to the expanded findings that are reported subsequently.

Evangelical christology holds that Jesus Christ is fully human and fully divine. He is God with us, God Incarnate, the pre-existent Son of God sent by God the Father to be the universal savior of humankind. His death upon the cross and resurrection

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[6] Omar McRoberts demonstrates that the empirical reality of a congregation's relation to society does not always fit exactly any of the types of church/society relations set out by Reinhold Niebuhr in his classic work *Christ and Culture*. See Omar M. McRoberts, "H. Richard Niebuhr Meets 'The Street'," in *Taking Faith Seriously*, ed. Mary Jo Blane, Brent Coffin, and Richard Higgins (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005).

[7] Wade Clark Roof, "Religion and Narrative," *Review of Religious Research* 34, no. 4 (1993): 303.

from the dead make the forgiveness of sins and the gift of eternal life available to human beings. The action of God in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ calls for human beings to repent towards God, trust in Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins, and depend upon the Holy Spirit to live a life of discipleship in obedience to the teaching and example of Jesus Christ.

Exemplarist christology claims Jesus is an exceptional human being inspired and empowered by God. However, the evidence of divine presence and activity in his life does not imply or necessarily require an identity of being between God and Jesus of Nazareth. Although Jesus shows the way to God, the path he points to is not the only way to God. Exemplarist christology is sympathetic to the idea that different religions lead to God; it just so happens the Jesus story is the path that Christians follow. Jesus demonstrates what it means to be truly human in relation to God and people; he is primarily an example to follow. Jesus' death upon the cross is an act of self-denying love that motivates Christians to love and care for those in need. The galvanizing factor in exemplarist christology is the reciprocal moral principle of the Golden Rule or love your neighbor as yourself, which is assumed to be a universally self-evident moral principle exemplified supremely in Jesus. His teaching about the kingdom of God is not a key feature of exemplarist christology.

Prophetic christology presents Jesus as the one who proclaims the in-breaking of the kingdom of God, a divine initiative, which challenges the norms of society and conventional religion, embodies God's commitment to justice for the poor and oppressed, and demonstrates God's inclusive love that is welcoming to all. The death

of Jesus is the outcome of remaining faithful to the kingdom of God, which challenges the vested interests of conventional Jewish society's religious, political, social, and economic institutions. Jesus' ministry is depicted moving from the margins to the centre of Jewish society. He begins in the uncouth and suspect region of Galilee associated with pagan Gentile influences, and then moves to the heart of Jewish economy, society, religion, and culture in Jerusalem. The ordinary believer who is serious about following Jesus Christ is called to enact God's inclusive love and work for the transformation of church and society by pursuing justice and peace for the poor and oppressed, those who are excluded and pushed out to the fringes of society.

Distribution of Christological Types

All three types of everyday christology can be found among the twenty-three people interviewed at First Baptist. Exemplarist christology (thirteen people) is the most common type present in the sample selected from First Baptist, then evangelical christology (eight people), and prophetic christology (two people)[8] accounts for a minority of interviewees. It is significant that the two adherents of prophetic christology exercise primary responsibility for preaching and teaching at First Baptist. The congregations is being exposed to a consistent portrait of Jesus as a prophetic figure that announced the kingdom of God and challenged the unjust religious and social institutions of his day. Prophetic christology is beginning to supplement the

[8] Ashlee Wiest-Laird and Lance Laird adhere to a prophetic christology.

christological convictions espoused by a growing number of ordinary believers at First Baptist that adhere to evangelical and exemplarist christologies. The life stories of the cradle Baptists in the congregation, whether American Baptist Churches (USA) or Southern Baptist Convention in origin, show that most had been introduced to evangelical christology in their early childhood and youth. In most cases the convictions about Jesus operative in these distinct groups of cradle Baptists changed with the passage of time in response to a variety of factors.

All twenty-one people interviewed at Ruggles Baptist Church exhibit an evangelical christology. People in this category of ordinary believers painted a remarkably consistent portrait of Jesus in their conversations with me, communicated a common narrative, and relied upon a standard vocabulary. They affirmed a clearly defined set of convictions about the person and work of Jesus Christ. A summary of the Jesus story as it is commonly told by ordinary believers at Ruggles Baptist Church follows, distilled from what I heard in conversation with interviewees, to give an overview and orientation to the more detailed breakdown of research data that is reported in relation to the teaching, death, resurrection, and identity of Jesus.

Evangelical Christology

*For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. (*John 3:16)

The Story of Jesus

The story of Jesus told by evangelical christology begins with the existence of a God of love who created the cosmos and humankind. Tragically, the human condition is marred by the fact of sin or wilful rebellion against God. Sin creates a barrier between God and human beings. However, God does not abandon the created order or human beings, rather God sets out to re-make relationship with estranged humanity. Emily neatly sums up the evangelical christological perspective on God's purpose in relation to human beings and humanity's condition of estrangement from God as a consequence of sin:

> *Emily (RBC 11)*
> *Well, my understanding is that God created us humans to be in relationships with him. And so all of us, more or less to some extent, have this little hunger inside to be in a relationship with the Father. But, because of the Fall, because of sin, we have a nature that's kind of twisted. We go to the wrong place and people don't want to surrender, myself included.*

God sent the eternal (and therefore pre-existent) Son of God in the life of Jesus of Nazareth to overcome the alienation caused by sin. The birth and life of Jesus fulfil promises made by God to the people of Israel, contained in the Old Testament, which envisage a day when God will draw near in person to create a new kind of relationship between God and human beings. Evangelical christology portrays God

as a long-term strategist, patiently working out the divine purpose, which is attested in the overarching story of the Bible:

> *Kimberly (RBC 1)*
> *He [Jesus] chose to become a human being rather than being in God's presence, to take on flesh and the pains of life.*

> *Luke (RBC 7)*
> *Because I learned that, you know, he was sent by God to the earth to sacrifice for our sins and while that happened many years ago and whoever believes that and prays that Jesus' blood will wash away your sins can be saved. So, I mean, like, all I'm saying here is just, you know, written in the Bible, but I am still in the finding of what that means to me.*

In fulfilment of these promises, a virgin conceives Jesus. The virginal conception of Jesus, his fulfilment of Old Testament prophecy, teaching, character of life, miracles, death, and resurrection confirm that his identity is both truly human and truly divine. The message Jesus proclaimed emphasizes God's desire to reclaim human beings to enjoy eternal relationship with God and the double command, made known in the Old Testament and reiterated by Jesus, to love God with one's entire being and to love one's neighbor as oneself:

> *Mark (RBC 5)*
> *By coming down here he was telling us that creation was originally good and that humanity is something God loves, but that we've had a separation from God caused by the Fall and that we al partake of that. He was offering grace to us to restore that relationship through his work on the cross. . . . Accepting that offer, that gift from God, then creates a new relationship with God, which means a new life and a whole different pathway of life.*

Jesus' death upon the cross is an act of love, a selfless sacrifice, which overcomes the problem of sin by paying a debt that no human being can pay. The corpse of Jesus, laid to rest in a tomb, following his death is not the end of the story. God raised Jesus

bodily from the grave. Jesus is alive and it is possible to enter into a relationship with him by faith and so be reconciled to God. The object of the Christian life is to trust and obey Jesus as Lord and Savior. He is experienced as a person with whom an ordinary believer can relate in everyday life.

The Teaching of Jesus

Evangelical christology perceives an intrinsic connection between Jesus and his teaching. The messenger and the message are so closely related that they are almost impossible to separate, a point made succinctly by Kimberly:

> *<u>Kimberly (RBC 1)</u>*
> *I just think it's hard to distinguish between him and his teaching. His teaching also relates to how we relate to one another. His teaching of love and humility and laying down his life for others, of serving others.*

For Kimberly, Jesus embodied his own teaching on love and humility in the act of dying upon the cross, and the teaching and example of Jesus are certainly to be applied to human relationships. Yet, Jesus is more than simply the best illustration of how to practice what he preached and more than a source of guidance for human relations, because he also taught that following him is vital to knowing God. Evangelical christology revolves around three themes when talking about the teaching of Jesus: entering into a relationship with God through Jesus, loving God with one's whole being, and loving one's neighbor as oneself.

First, more than anything else, the teaching of Jesus demonstrates that he longs for people to enjoy relationship with God:

Karin (RBC 8)
He wants people to have relationship with God, to have everlasting life, too. To live forever and ever and he wants people to know that he loves them. He wants people to be with him eternally.

Emily (RBC 11)
I would say the core of Jesus' teaching is that human beings want their own way, away from God and get really horribly lost and really messed up . . . and God himself came and made a way to get out of that mess and to be back in fellowship with him and that Jesus was the way.

Alex (RBC 16)
Well, uh, I guess it's to, you know, repent and turn away from sin and to follow him . . . love God more than anything and to love everyone as much as we love ourselves.

God chooses to take the initiative and re-make relationship with sinful human beings. To establish a relationship with God is to repent (turn around the direction of one's life and head back towards God), enter into a personal knowledge of God's love, receive the gift of eternal life (understood as life beyond death that does not end), and follow Jesus Christ as his disciple. Jesus is the way back to God and functions as a mediator or bridge between God and human beings. Emily explains how the Gospel was presented visually to her in an evangelistic tract *The Bridge to Life*[9] that helped make sense of who Jesus is and what it means to be a Christian:

[9] *The Bridge to Life* is a tract published by The Navigators, an evangelical parachurch organization established in 1933 to evangelize and make Christian disciples. The tract can be viewed at: www.navigators.org/us/resources/illustrations/items/bridge. *The Bridge to Life* has a four-step sequence similar to *The Four Spiritual Laws* propagated by Campus Crusade For Christ:
Step 1 – God's Love and His plan
Step 2 – Our Problem: Separation from God
Step 3 – God's Remedy: The Cross
Step 4 – Our Response

Emily (RBC 11)
Well, without going into a whole lot of details, my life went into a massive skid and I crashed and burned. I tried to like other things and nothing helped me and at the age of 22 I came across a couple of tracts and one of them said, "What does it mean to be born again?" And one of them was called "The Bridge to Life".

"The Bridge to Life" was very simple and it had a lot of pictures and a few words, which is good for me, because as much as I like words, I do better with pictures. And it showed a cliff with a little man standing, or human, on one side, and a cliff with God on the other and this gi-normous cavern in between. And the guy was flat out of luck because God was way over there. And then it showed the cross on which Jesus died and the guy walked over the cross to God. And, uh, well that just totally made sense to me.

Karin, Emily, and Alex express sentiments that echo the thrust of Larry Showalter's preaching and the Contemporary Christian Music used in public worship at Ruggles. The congregational christology conveyed in public worship at Ruggles, which focuses on God's desire to enter into relationship with individual human beings and the central importance of Jesus' in God's "Plan of Salvation", reinforces the everyday christology embedded in the lives of ordinary believers. Congregational practices support the convictions held by individual ordinary believers.

Evangelical christology acknowledges destructive consequences for people because of the human propensity for wandering away from God. They get themselves, as Emily puts it, "horribly lost and messed up." Yet, the prospect of eternal separation is implied rather than overtly stated in interviews given for "Living with Jesus". Interviewees that fall into the category of evangelical christology prefer to stress the positive aspect of the Jesus story as they understand it, namely, God desires relationship with human beings. Rarely do they make explicit reference to the

prospect of spending an eternity in hell as a consequence of disregarding Jesus and his teaching.[10] Why was the traditional language of the evangelical doctrine of salvation muted or absent? Probing a bit deeper it became clear that the theological categories of sin, hell, and the theory of substitutionary atonement posed pastoral and missional difficulties to interviewees, which shaped their everyday experience and practice, as will become clear in the sections on the affective dimension of evangelical christological convictions and everyday practices of faith.

The second and third strands identified as the heart of Jesus' teaching by evangelical christology are drawn from his summary of the Law and Prophets[11] distilled from the Old Testament:[12]

> *Daphne (FBCJP 5)*
> *I would say when he was asked, the Great Commandment to love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, soul, mind, and strength and love thy neighbor as thyself. I would say that that for me is the heart of Jesus' message. You know, part of that is also the redemption, the forgiveness that we are granted through Christ. So I would say those two things are what I believe, are for me, anyway, I look at as the most significant parts of the Gospel.*

> *Michelle (RBC 18)*
> *What are the two greatest commandments? Love the Lord your God and love your neighbor as yourself.*

> *Miriam (RBC 20)*
> *Uh, love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself.*

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[10] The preponderance of talk about God desiring to enter into "relationship" and reluctance to speak of "hell" echoes the sensitivities and practice of Larry Showalter in his sermons.

[11] See Matthew 22:34-40; Mark 12:28-34; Luke 10:25-28.

[12] See Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18.

The direction of love from the human heart stretches across two planes: vertically to God and horizontally to fellow human beings. Love for God in evangelical christological perspective means cultivating a personal relationship of total devotion to God. Since evangelical christology believes that Jesus is God, the language applied to God and Jesus is often interchangeable. Participation in public worship and personal devotions are the concrete practices by which such a relationship with God/Jesus is developed. It is striking that the first component of Jesus' teaching in evangelical christology (God desires to enter into relationship with people) is intensified by the second, which exhorts the follower of Jesus to love God with his or her whole being. Such an emphasis is consistent with a historic Baptist habit of prioritizing the individual person and forgiveness of sins in the economy of God's salvation.[13] A potential danger is that teaching on the kingdom of God (rule of God in creation and society), the church (the Christian community), and sanctification (growth in Christ-like character) receive little attention.[14]

The final element in the teaching of Jesus according to evangelical christology is the command to love one's neighbor. Exactly what it means to love one's neighbor is never explicitly defined by any of the interviewees, nor is it a theme that receives much attention in the sermons or songs at Ruggles. Preaching, when it addresses practical application, is directed mainly to what the individual believer needs to do in

[13] Mark S. Medley, "A Good Walk Spoiled? Revisiting Baptist Soteriology," in *Recycling the Past or Researching History? Studies in Baptist Historiography and Myths*, ed. Philip E. Thomson and Anthony R. Cross (Bletchley, Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2005), 84-105.

[14] All three doctrinal themes are key topics in the theology of James McClendon.

order to maintain a close relationship with God. Sermons at Ruggles Baptist Church do acknowledge the reality of injustice within American society that can blight the lives of individuals. Social trends deemed to be destructive for human wellbeing are criticized, and the nation is depicted as departing from a Judeo-Christian heritage to its moral and spiritual detriment. However, the prevailing emphasis in sermons is on turning to Jesus Christ and a limited set of practical issues (attending worship, seeking fellowship, witnessing, praying regularly, studying the Bible, and vetting what one watches on television and accesses on the internet) pertaining to the Christian life. Overall, the impression given is that what it means to love one's neighbor remains unspecified.[15]

The Death of Jesus: Substitutionary Atonement

Evangelical christology routinely advances a theory of substitutionary atonement to make sense of the cross,[16] a theory that interprets the death of Jesus as a sacrifice (in the sense of a gift made at great personal cost by one person for the benefit of others powerless to help themselves) that pays the price exacted for sins or wilful acts of rebellion against God. It is communicated from the pulpits of

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[15] Matthew Guest concludes that silence and generalizations on moral issues in preaching is a strategy for maintaining unity and avoiding conflict amidst the diversity of people and views present in a prominent evangelical Anglican congregation in York, England. See Mathew Guest. "'Friendship, Fellowship and Acceptance': The Public Discourse of a Thriving Evangelical Congregation," in *Congregational Studies in the UK: Christianity in a Post-Christian Context*, ed. Mathew Guest, Karin Tusting, and Linda Woodhead (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), 76-81.

[16] A standard evangelical account of the cross, respected on both sides of the Atlantic, appears in John Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Leicester: Inter Varsity Press, 1986). The theory of substitutionary atonement has been questioned publicly within evangelical circles in recent years. See Steve Chalke and Alan Mann, *The Lost Message of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003).

evangelical congregations and through the evangelistic ministries of countless evangelical organizations like Campus Crusade for Christ, Inter Varsity Fellowship, and the Navigators.[17] The theory of substitutionary atonement as a way of understanding the cross has been taught to all twenty-one people interviewed at Ruggles Baptist Church and the group within First Baptist Church in Jamaica Plain that operate with an evangelical christology.[18]

The interviewees from Ruggles and First Baptist demonstrating an evangelical christology had the most to say about the cross of Jesus. Although the phrase "substitutionary atonement" rarely crossed the lips of interviewees, the responses they gave when asked to explain what the cross of Jesus meant to them show that "substitutionary atonement" accurately describes their understanding of the cross.[19] Interviewees interpreted the death of Jesus as a sacrifice that pays the price for human sins:

> *Karin (RBC 8)*
> *Paid the penalty, the price I could not pay.*
>
> *Maxwell (RBC 10)*
> *Well, the Perfect Lamb needed to be sacrificed. He just left his position in heaven in order to be that perfect sacrifice.*

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[17] Most people interviewed at Ruggles have experience of being formed in the early stages of Christian faith by evangelical parachurch ministries.

[18] Some individuals at First Baptist have either abandoned an evangelical christology completely or bits of it that are no longer compatible with the theology they now subscribe to.

[19] Substitutionary atonement theory is the most prevalent model across both congregations. The data reported in "Living with Jesus" contrasts with the results of Ann Christie's research among lay Anglicans in the North of England. A minority of interviewees (five out of thirty) espoused a theory of substitutionary atonement to make sense of the cross. See Ann Christie, "Ordinary Christology: A Qualitative Study and Theological Appraisal" (Ph.D. diss., University of Durham, 2005), 80 and 139-149,

Maxwell and Michelle elaborated on the meaning of sacrifice:

> *Maxwell (RBC 10)*
> *What sacrifice means? I would say sacrifice, in this context, means sort of a paying of the penalty. I guess sort of . . . paying the cost for or really even trading one thing for another. There is this cost that needs to be paid and God in his holiness and in his perfectness is not going to overlook that cost that needs to be paid. And you know it all stops right here until that cost is paid. The only thing that is acceptable for that to be paid is this sacrifice that Jesus made. His sacrifice. I guess that's how I would explain it, like a cost that needs to be paid.*

> *Michelle (RBC 18)*
> *With Jesus dying on the cross it pays for our sin, because he was the perfect Lamb, unblemished Lamb, who paid the price for our sin. And somehow in God's economy sin is cancelled by blood.*

Evangelical christology presupposes that the character of God combines justice and love, which means God cares passionately about humankind but cannot ignore the reality of sin that creates a barrier between God and human beings. The problem cannot be remedied by human ingenuity or effort, but a divine solution is available. God is love and desires to restore fellowship with human beings and so freely chooses to effect the salvation of human beings in the person and work of Jesus Christ. The theory of substitutionary atonement sets out to explain how the human predicament caused by sin is overcome. According to the theory, Jesus deals with the problem of sin by making a sacrifice at great personal cost by offering his life in our place, even though he was completely innocent and sinless in disposition and action before God. His death effects a transaction that "pays" for the accumulated "debt" incurred by human sins and so satisfies the justice of God.

The idea of satisfaction, although often perplexing and even repulsive to proponents of exemplarist and prophetic christologies, is intelligible, because it draws upon a familiar concept, namely, the settling of a debt by a person at great cost to himself for the sake of others who cannot do anything to get themselves out of their predicament. A person may not necessarily understand how the cross effects payment for sins, but he or she can grasp the basic concept at the heart of the theory of substitutionary atonement:

> *Emily (RBC 11)*
> *I wouldn't say I understood it, but I accept that when he died on the cross, somehow he died and took my sins so that I don't have to.*

Emily does not comprehend how the blood/death of Jesus solves the problem of her sins, how he can assume her sins and their consequences, but she accepts the teaching that this is in fact what happens. She assumes God is characterized by love and justice and has ordered the moral universe in such a way that the demands of justice must be satisfied. There is an element here of faith taking the Gospel story and a particular interpretation of it on trust.

When asked to clarify the meaning of "sacrifice" interviewees with an evangelical christology argued that the cross must be viewed against the backdrop of the Old Testament, where the practice of sacrifice amounts to a limited foreshadowing of what Jesus accomplished decisively once and for all on the cross for the forgiveness of sins:

Brenda (RBC 9)
The sacrificial system was set up in the Old Testament through the blood of the lambs, but it never washed away their sins. They had to keep burning the sacrifice, but then as a gift to us he sent Jesus himself as the last sacrifice to die on the cross and to take away the sins of the world, to take all the sins onto himself so that we wouldn't have to deal with the sin, because we can't. You know God had to do it for us through the sacrifice of his Son.

I see it as a combination of payment for sin and his obedience to the Father, his complete obedience to the Father, being willing even to go to death. And I also see the justice aspect . . . the whole Old Testament picturing of sacrifice and sacrifice for sin and Jesus being the Lamb of God, as you know, John the Baptist called him.

Miriam (RBC 20)
Ah, so God set up the system whereby sacrifice was necessary to pay for sins. In Israelite times they had to do sacrifices every year. And so one thing that Jesus did is his sacrifice was once for all. So he sacrifices himself. He can take all the sins of the world on himself . . . all the sins pre and post and during his time. And that sacrifice is acceptable because Jesus had no sin. So he was one without blemish. And God can't face sins. God turns away from sins.

No interviewee indicated to whom the debt Jesus settled is paid. For example, is the debt satisfied by Jesus' death on the cross, paid to God or some impersonal moral principle woven into the fabric of the universe? Little evidence of reflecting on the implications of interpreting the cross of Jesus as a sacrifice for the forgiveness of sins emerged from the interviews. Participants in "Living with Jesus" operating with an evangelical christological perspective did not penetrate the idea of substitutionary atonement to think about the logical implications (for example, "To whom or what does Christ make payment?") inherent within this version of the Jesus story. Nor is there any evidence of inquiry into metaphysical issues like, "How is God present in Jesus to effect forgiveness of sins by his death on the cross?"

The theory of substitutionary atonement and the metaphor of sacrifice convey the conviction that God alone in Jesus has the ability to overcome the problem caused by sin. These are powerful ideas and images with the ability to inspire faith and devotion. Rita, an international student, became a Christian on the first day of her arrival in the United States to pursue graduate studies in Boston, articulates the joy and gratitude expressed repeatedly in conversations with adherents of an evangelical christology:

> *Rita (RBC 4)*
> *I am so happy to be a Christian.*

It the course of interviews adherents of evangelical christology spoke movingly and with great appreciation about Jesus' death upon the cross:

> *Maxwell (RBC 10)*
> *And the pain that he went through and just the love that he showed for us . . . I think what the death of Jesus means is just . . . unbelievable love. Yeah, I mean, just a love that you have to respond to that. You have to respond to that love in some way. It's like, if you understand what the death of Jesus really means and what he really did in dying for us, you can't, you know, if you have a brain and a heart, you must respond to that.*

There can be no doubt that the wonder of God's love, demonstrated in Jesus' "sacrificial" death upon the cross, evokes a deeply felt response of praise and gratitude often with an accompanying desire to live a manner of life worthy of Jesus who is both Savior and Lord for ordinary believers committed to an evangelical christology. The cross of Jesus so interpreted illustrates the multifaceted nature of a conviction with its cognitive, volitional, and affective components.

The Resurrection

Evangelical christology confesses that the resurrection of Jesus from the dead is "literal" and "bodily" as opposed to "figurative" and "metaphysical". It is not to be confused with the resuscitation of a patient in an emergency room. Neither is it to be treated as a figurative account to illustrate a spiritual principle. Nor is it a phenomenon confined to the inner subjective experience of the disciples. Jesus really died, was placed in a tomb, and then was raised to life:

> *Kimberly (RBC 1)*
> *I understand that according to the prophecies in scripture that Jesus, after having been slain, killed on a cross, buried in the tomb, that his body disappeared, that he appeared to his disciples. I do understand it to be literal, miraculous, but literal, as opposed to figurative or metaphysical. I believe that it was – I don't know that absolutely that it was necessary for the sake of salvation of people, because I think that was essential in terms of the sacrifice was the death of Christ, but because he was God and could not be killed his resurrection on this earth was the ultimate sign of his divine nature. It is the ultimate miracle, the ultimate confirmation that everything he said was true.*

> *Maxwell (RBC 10)*
> *Oh, yeah, I definitely understand it literally. Yes, it was a bodily resurrection and that Jesus is alive right now. . . . I guess our sins were paid for by the death. Because something needs to be, you know, the Lamb needs to be sacrificed to atone for sins. But did the resurrection need to happen to atone for sins? Or were the sins already taken care of and the resurrection accomplished something else? That I don't know.*

> *Emily (RBC 11)*
> *The resurrection proves that Jesus was God in the flesh, in a human body. I think the resurrection proves that the sacrifice was acceptable.*

> *Michelle (RBC 18)*
> *God raised him from the dead. I mean he physically died and then he was brought back to life and he lives, sits at the right hand of the Father, so he's alive now, which is pretty amazing.*

Elizabeth (FBCJP 13)
Jesus Christ was crucified and was buried and rose again. I believe in a literal resurrection.

The resurrection demonstrates Jesus' divine nature, confirms the veracity of the message he proclaimed, and means that he is alive today. Interestingly, Kimberly and Maxwell, in effect, make the atonement the whole story.[20] The resurrection functions as an appendix to the work of the cross; it contributes nothing to the forgiveness of sins. At the very least it is not obvious that it is in any way a necessary component of Jesus' saving work. For Kimberly and Maxwell, the resurrection is primarily about confirming the identity of Jesus. The resurrection shows that he is God.

Patricia, a member at First Baptist, affirms an evangelical understanding of the person of Jesus (he is truly human and truly divine) and his work (he died for the forgiveness of sins). She regards Jesus as "a personal Savior" and wants to believe that what she was taught to believe about the resurrection of Jesus from the dead is true:

Patricia (FBCJP 9)
It's a great mystery. Shakespeare says it right, you know, 'The undiscovered country' and that's true. I think everybody has doubts at times if they are honest. I hope, it's my hope, that I will meet people I love after death and it seems to me that – that's because I 'm nearer to the end of the road than a lot of people I'm taking to these days (laughter) that it's getting to be more important – but I do like to think . . . that the spirit must exist after death.

[20] Dallas Willard, a Baptist philosopher, criticizes versions of the Gospel that make one particular theory of atonement the whole story and reduce the message of Jesus to a punctilia moment of salvation, the work of justification, and fail to say anything about regeneration or new life. See Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life in God* (San Francisco: Harper, 1998), 42-50.

> *Well, I've been brought up to believe that. I want to believe it. I want to believe it. I guess there are some things you have to choose to take a leap of faith. How much I believe it, I don't know. We all have doubts, but I want to believe it.*

But she is troubled:

> *As I say I do want to believe it. It is very shaking to hear some of the things that I have heard in the last few years and that book by Marcus Borg seems to me was as destructive of faith as any book I've ever read. So, I don't know. Maybe. I don't know. Maybe the old way is just to comfort us and shut us up so that we would go away (laughter) or in a way it's very cruel if it is, especially for old people, which I am. . . . You have to make a choice. No one will ever be able to prove it, I don't think, one way or the other.*

Doubts, uncertainties, and a sense of mystery are not totally absent from the realm of evangelical christology. Patricia struggles with revisionist understandings of Jesus that she has encountered in recent years, and singles out Marcus Borg, an author referred to and recommended in the preaching and teaching at First Baptist. He is also a contributing commentator featured in the DVD series Living the Questions[21] designed to be a tool for progressive Christianity "honoring mystery, emphasizing social justice, and taking Jesus seriously".[22] Living the Questions is intended to be an alternative to the Alpha Course, which has an evangelical provenance. It was used as the basis for the Adult Christian Education program at First Baptist over the summer of 2005.[23] From Patricia's perspective, Borg's interpretation of Jesus questions many

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[21] For more information on Living the Questions see www.livingthequestions.com.

[22] A brief film introducing Living the Questions can be viewed on YouTube: www.youtube.com/watch?v=vZVNVwcuPm8.

[23] "Christian Education Series Begins - July 10," *The First Baptist Church in Jamaica Plain* 3, no. 7 (July 2005), 3.

of the convictions that she was taught to believe and has lived by for the majority of her life. The congregational christology at First Baptist, except for the hymnody and liturgy, which retains much traditional content, no longer reinforce Patricia's everyday christology. Consequently, she feels anxious, particularly as she approaches the horizon of her own death. Is her hope in life after death based on a secure foundation?

Although most interviewees with an evangelical christology were categorical about the bodily nature of the resurrection, they did recognize that the event transformed the body of Jesus.[24] He could appear and disappear at will, pass through doors, and, yet, eat fish for breakfast:

> *Bill (RBC 15)*
> *I mean Jesus seemed to take on a different form, a different nature and appeared to walk through doorways. But, yet, when Thomas is invited to feel, to put his hand in his side, he felt totally human. So I do see it as a bodily resurrection, but there seemed to be other components to whatever form Christ took, that he was seemingly both a body, but spiritual at the same time . . . the fact that he could . . . go through doors.*

Bill's educational background is in science. Altogether, six of the people interviewed at Ruggles have college and graduate level education in physics, computer science, and biology. They have all struggled to reconcile scientific worldviews and Christian convictions as part of their journey towards faith. Tina's story addresses how she made the transition from unbelief to belief. She is an international student educated in a comprehensively secular state system:

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[24] The Gospel accounts record that despite the continuity between Jesus in his earthly and risen states, his appearance was not immediately recognizable to companions that knew him well (Luke 24:13-36; John 20:11-18).

Tina (RBC 19)
There was a period in my life that I didn't believe in God. That happened during high school time. It is because, I think, my teachers were really talking about scientific things. They were trying to explain everything with science and I thought, maybe, science would explain everything. If science cannot explain them, there's nothing. Without science, we shouldn't believe the other things, you know. There was a period for me that I was an atheist, but that was a short time.

Tina explained the reason for her change from atheism to belief in God. She has concluded that science cannot solve all the riddles that arise in life:

Tina (RBC 19)
It's all - emotional. You ask questions all the time and I understand that science cannot answer all the questions; it is impossible. There are questions like, "Why?" "Why" questions. It is impossible that science can explain them. I don't think that they will find an answer after this period; it is impossible. It is about the emotions and soul.

Mervyn, a scientist by training and profession, thinks the New Testament accounts of the risen Jesus entirely compatible with his worldview on the basis that the kind of things he did (like pass through a wall or door) are in theory possible (if not probable) and there are mysteries in the operation of the universe human beings do not yet perceive or understand:

Mervyn (RBC 21)
In other words, the bodily resurrection of Jesus, it seems that the stories…are clear. I mean, he's sitting on a shore eating fish and calls them over to have breakfast. He comes into a room . . . without the door opening. . . . I consider myself a scientist and fairly well schooled in physics. So . . . you cannot say that it's impossible for a certain accumulation of molecules that exist on one side of a wall to then fly through the wall, because there's plenty of space. As it turns out walls are quite permeable to other molecules. If you look at the space between a proton and an electron it's vast; it's like the sun and planets, it's on that scale. And so that's true for all. So it's not at all impossible . . . for molecules to fly through doors and arrange themselves on the other side in the same thing. It's just incredibly unlikely. . . . All this gets back to Jesus being able to go through the door. Well, throw

> *in some mysterious factor that we don't know, which is how all things, all matter in the universe is held together. . . . Like, all you have to do is add a dimension . . . to do things seemingly impossible.*

Although keen to assert the bodily resurrection of Jesus, none of the interviewees exhibiting an evangelical christology talked about what happened to the body of the risen Jesus after the Ascension (Luke 24:50-53). The cognitive conviction that Jesus rose from the dead was taken on trust once the interviewee had been satisfied that it was plausible. However, the claims made about the bodily resurrection of Jesus (the cognitive dimension of the conviction) were supported positively in the minds of individuals curious about Christianity when they saw evidence of the Gospel transforming a believer's lifestyle (the volitional dimension of the conviction) and personally experienced what they believed to be the risen Jesus in their own lives (the affective dimension of the conviction).

The Identity of Jesus: Savior, Lord, and God

When asked, "Who is Jesus for you today?" the overwhelming majority of ordinary believers operating with an evangelical christology began by saying that Jesus is Savior and Lord. They define the identity of Jesus by his work of salvation for the forgiveness of sins (atonement) and his authority to rule over disciples as an ongoing present reality. Jesus is the one that has connected the ordinary believer in relationship to God and to whom the Christian owes obedience in every aspect of his or her personal life. Discourse about Jesus as "Savior" and "Lord" in evangelical christological perspective is conducted primarily with reference to the individual

believer. The individual believer speaks of what Jesus has done and who Jesus is for him or her:

Angela (FBCJP 1)
Well, Jesus is my Lord and Savior. He, I guess, sets an example of what I should strive to be, to be a follower, to be a Christian. I guess that is basically who Jesus is to me.

Fiona (FBCJP 2)
Jesus is keeper of my life, savior of my life.

Tanya (RBC 2)
Well, first and foremost, he is savior, redeemer, and then he is also example to follow and what it means to bring Shalom to earth.

Mark (RBC 5)
He is my Lord and my Savior. And that's a journey. I mean the Savior part I feel is a done deal, but the Lordship part I would, Julian, describe my life - is a journey of learning - more and more pieces in my heart to Christ as Lord, and I need to do that in community. I can't just do that on a one-to-one relationship with Christ. I need believers around me.

Karin (RBC 8)
He is Savior. He saved me from death and selfish destruction. He forgives me.

Emily (RBC 11)
He is my Savior and Lord.

Corinne (RBC 12)
I think that he is somebody who is my Lord and Savior.

Ann (RBC 13)
He is my Savior.

Bill (RBC 15)
So I see him as a personal savior.

Tanya sees Jesus as an example to follow.[25] He shows what it means to work for the "shalom" (peace/wholeness) of God in the world. For Tanya, Jesus' redemptive work is not restricted to the event of the cross but is intrinsic to his life and ministry. The atonement is not the whole story of the Gospel. Indeed, she also concedes that a theory of substitutionary atonement does not necessarily comprehend the whole meaning of the cross:

> *Tanya (RBC 2)*
> *But I'm willing to believe there is more mystery in it than a straight substitution – Jesus was punished for our sins.*

Tanya's response illustrates that evangelical christology is broadly consistent, but not completely monolithic. Curiosity and mystery can be found at the edges. Her response also demonstrates a strain of thought that goes beyond a concern for personal salvation. The concept of "shalom", which is derived from the Old Testament, alludes to a more holistic notion of mission in Tanya's thinking that incorporates a commitment to social justice and working to protect the natural environment.[26]

Mark makes explicit what is implied in many interviews or expressed in circumspect ways. The work of Jesus as "Savior" refers to his death upon the cross and the forgiveness of sins granted to the ordinary believer at the moment of confessing faith in Jesus Christ. Hence, this title describes what Jesus has done in the

[25] The idea of Jesus as an example to follow is not confined to exemplarist christology.

[26] These concerns are more typical of prophetic christology. Tanya has what appears to be a hybrid Christology that is primarily evangelical in content, but manifests exemplarist and prophetic christological traits.

distant past of human history and the more recent past experience of the ordinary believer to enable him or her to enter into a relationship with God, what Mark refers to as "a done deal". The title "Lord", in contrast, signifies the rule of Jesus in the contemporary experience of the believer as part of a Christian community. For Mark, living under the rule of Jesus Christ is an on-going process or "journey" worked out in the company of fellow disciples. Christian community, a web of supportive relationships, is essential for nurture and growth in the life of an individual Christian. The church serves a functional purpose to mature the faith and practice of the ordinary believer.

Evangelical christology includes the belief that Jesus is God.[27] Tyrone Inbody is correct that evangelical christology perceives itself to be in agreement with the historic teaching of the Christian church about the person and work of Jesus Christ.[28] It does not seek a novel or reconfigured understanding of Jesus Christ but claims to affirm what the Bible teaches about Jesus and believe what is orthodox about Jesus in the sense of holding to teaching congruent with the ecumenical creeds of Chalcedon and Nicaea.[29] There is no doubt that the modernist cultural and conceptual framework within which evangelicalism arose has shaped the movement's approach

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[27] Historically, Christian theology has avoided simply saying, "Jesus is God". Some element of qualification is normally employed to explain what it means to affirm both the deity of Jesus and belief in one God only. However, the nuances of Patristic debates and modern systematic theology are not common currency in everyday theology. Hence, "Living with Jesus" employs popular usage.

[28] Inbody, *Faces of Christology*, 71-74.

[29] Larry Showalter asserts that Ruggles is committed to orthodox belief in the sense of agreement with historic ecumenical creeds in public worship and the church's written assessment of its identity.

to interpreting the Bible and the historic ecumenical creeds of the early church. In the case of Ruggles Baptist Church, it is the pastor that articulates a commitment to belief in line with historic ecumenical statements of orthodoxy. Ordinary believers, if they have encountered the ecumenical creeds have done so in church traditions and liturgical contexts other than Baptist culture. Some adherents of evangelical christology at Ruggles and First Baptist are familiar with evangelical statements of faith promulgated by organizations like Inter Varsity Fellowship and Campus Crusade for Christ. It is an intriguing aspect of contemporary Baptist life that many Baptists are unfamiliar with the creeds of the early church. Creeds are not typically utilized within Baptist patterns of worship or teaching. Indeed, contemporary Baptists are, generally speaking, unaware of historic Baptist confessions of faith designed to demonstrate that Baptists are orthodox in their doctrine.

Interviewees routinely confessed that Jesus is God without going any further in their comments. Frequently "Jesus" and "God" function as interchangeable terms:

> <u>*Karin (RBC 8)*</u>
> *Jesus is God embodied. Friend. Counsellor. He is the one that answers prayer. He walks with me and even though I am far away from my family he is bringing me consolation. He is Savior. He saved me from death and selfish destruction. He forgives me.*
>
> <u>*Brenda (RBC 9)*</u>
> *He is still my friend and he is still my God. I still have a personal relationship with him that is very meaningful. My faith has never wavered from that point, you know, in terms of belief.*
>
> <u>*Emily (RBC 11)*</u>
> *But somehow, because Jesus was God and human at the same time, his blood, that he shed, permanently took care of humanity's sins. And the resurrection shows that that sacrifice was acceptable and it shows that he*

> *was divine and not just some confused prophet or something that got martyred.*
>
> *<u>Daphne (FBCJP 5)</u>*
> *I feel very comfortable that Jesus was both fully human and divine, and that is still part of what my belief is.*
>
> *<u>Janice (FBCJP 18)</u>*
> *Jesus is . . . God, the one who, you know, who helps my mom, my friends, my children. Jesus knows me better than anyone. . . . He's real. The same Jesus who walked the water and did all those things, he's still doing the same thing. He's doing the same thing.*

Jesus is God. He was truly human and truly divine in his earthly life. Such affirmations pepper the conversations conducted with the ordinary believers interviewed at Ruggles Baptist Church and feature in speech of the smaller group of like-minded people at First Baptist Church in Jamaica Plain. The conviction that Jesus is God was mostly taught to people by evangelical parachurch ministries, especially at college, and to a lesser extent by the congregations people experienced. Although the deity of Jesus is implicitly assumed to be a cardinal Christian conviction that must be believed if one is to be orthodox (in agreement with the historic ecumenical creeds of the early church) and a proper Christian, it is evident that interviewees lack any kind of "grammar" to make sense of the relation between God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. God and Jesus are spoken of as distinct persons, particularly when interviewees are talking about the plan of salvation. They are clear that God sent the Son to save us from our sins in the life of Jesus of Nazareth. Yet, God and Jesus frequently function as interchangeable terms when interviewees attempt to talk about their experience. A handful of interviewees voiced difficulty in

distinguishing between the risen Jesus and the work of the Holy Spirit. The inevitable conclusion is that evangelical christology seeks to be orthodox by affirming the true humanity and true deity of Jesus and confessing the uniquely Christian understanding of God as Trinity, but struggles to understand and articulate these doctrinal convictions.

The Affective Element of Evangelical Christology

The Gospel is not simply a message to be believed cognitively and acted upon volitionally. Jesus is the content of the Good News that Christian worship and mission declare. He is a real person who is alive and accessible to people in the present. The conviction that Jesus can be encountered and known personally here and now is founded on the Christian belief that God raised Jesus from the dead (the doctrine of the resurrection) and an appeal to personal experience.

The distinctive feature of evangelical christology is the emphasis on Jesus' risen presence with his followers. An experiential or affective dimension is characteristic of evangelical christology. It can be described as a form of mysticism focused on the risen Jesus. In a sense, then, the cognitive aspect of christological conviction (God raised Jesus from the dead and he is alive today) is to be appropriated by each individual believer in the realm of personal experience. Certainly, the affective element of evangelical convictions about Jesus stand out from comments made about the identity of Jesus. Daphne, for example, turns to Jesus as a source of calm and comfort:

Daphne (FBCJP 5)
Jesus is still the point of reference of peace and tranquillity and comfort and an example of courage, an example of standing up when really you don't feel like standing up, but there are things we say we believe in. Jesus is an example of love and social justice. So those are just a few of the meanings that I derive from thinking of Jesus.[30]

Jesus' identity in evangelical christology is informed by the idea that he is ever present with the believer and possesses an intimate knowledge of each of his followers. A believer can talk to Jesus, cry out to him for help, and seek guidance for how to live from day to day:

Kimberly (RBC 1)
He is so many things at the same time; it's hard to know where to begin. I guess I would start by saying he is somebody who is with me all the time, more than anybody else, obviously. He knows me better than anybody else. . . . I guess he is a friend according to a whole new definition of friendship. . . . He has become the person I am closest to, the person for whom I live, and the person that I am most dedicated to, most important to me.

Jesus is close like no other person and he is at work to change his followers from the inside out. The sense of his closeness may vary, but his presence is not doubted. At this point ethnographic inquiry reaches a boundary that it cannot cross. A researcher cannot probe further behind the self-reporting of an interview to experience what the interviewee senses and describes. The most that can be affirmed is that the kind of experience described by interviewees is attributed to the risen Jesus:

Philip (RBC 6)
Jesus is someone who is so close at times that he is closer than a real person. I mean, one of his names is 'Emmanuel' (God with us) and that sense I have of him being with me is, sometimes, is just really real. Other times it doesn't

[30] Daphne's christology is principally evangelical, but she exhibits exemplarist and prophetic christological traits in her comments that Jesus is "an example of standing up" and "an example of love and social justice".

> *feel so real or so close, but enough that I know he's a real person. . . . Shortly after I became a Christian I had this feeling of Jesus being with me that was so powerful that it was part of how I knew he was real.*
>
> *Amy (FBCJP 6)*
> *Right now (emphatic). More so since I've been coming here. See, I stayed away from churches for a long time, because I don't want to say what church, but I was in a church and it scared the hell out of me. Everything was, everything I saw, everything I was doing was wrong. And I said something's not right so I didn't go to church for many years after that. The minute they start trying to change you I can't stay there, because I feel that Jesus is going to change me. He's going to do the work inside of me, not other people.*

Interviewees described Jesus as a "friend" or "best friend", someone to be approached in complete confidence with the joys and sorrows of life. Jesus can be trusted:

> *Philip (RBC 6)*
> *I think of Jesus as a friend. There are times when I get lonely and there are times when I get upset or whatever and I can talk to him. Sometimes I can talk to him about things that I can't tell anyone else.*
>
> *Emily (RBC 11)*
> *He is my best friend.*
>
> *Ann (RBC 13)*
> *He's most of the time functioning as my best friend, although . . . if he is my best friend, he feels a little more distant than at other times.*

Friendship is a form of relationship. Evangelical christology stresses the affective conviction that an ordinary believer exists in a state of personal relationship with the risen Jesus:

> *Corinne (RBC 12)*
> *I just feel like I have a relationship with Jesus and I feel like I really struggle with him and I feel like I can get angry and frustrated and sad and, you know, vulnerable and all those things.*

Bill (RBC 15)
I see him as someone who is seeking relationship with us. . . . .Someone who is approachable, that you can have conversations any time of the day and you don't have to go through any intercessor or anything like that. He's available and accessible.

Alex (RBC 16)
Lord, Savior, living, somebody I can talk to. Somebody I can complain to, somebody I can pray to, somebody that I love.

These affirmations of closeness, friendship, and relationship are positive, encouraging, and energizing. They articulate the felt experience of ordinary believers. But, there is another side to the experience of Jesus, one that is more troubling and exacting. Evangelical christology portrays Jesus as one to whom the ordinary believer is expected to be totally committed, but sometimes the demands that Jesus is perceived to place on people seem too much to cope with:

Philip (RBC 6)
Sometimes I think of Jesus as a king who has demands on me that I am obligated to fulfil. My sense of obligation sometimes is more than I can bear.

For Philip the sense of duty associated with the rule of Jesus over his life weighs heavily upon him. His everyday christology is apparently struggling to integrate the experience of grace that brings forgiveness, joy, and peace with the demands that the unmerited but freely given goodness of God places upon the follower of Jesus to live a transformed life.

The evangelical discourse about Jesus poses a further significant pastoral dilemma for some ordinary believers. Amy, a member at First Baptist, voiced deep distress at the implications of an exclusivist soteriology (doctrine of salvation), which

teaches that conscious faith in Jesus Christ alone guarantees eternal salvation. She frets that the Lord might return before her family are saved:

> *Amy (FBCJP 6)*
> *I'm serious about it. This is no game, this is for real, and, boy, I've got to be prepared. And sometimes I get scared, even though I am a believer. God says he might come like a thief in the night, and sometimes I am lying in bed, and part of me, like I say, is very happy. Another part is very worried about the ones that are not saved. Is he going to come in the night when we're not ready? It does take a lot of joy away. Yeah, you have such a love for your family. They are all like people just doing their thing here and they don't realize it. And then I say, "I'm so happy that I realize it."*

Two contrasting sets of emotions or affections are expressed in Amy's comment. First, the experience of salvation (entering into a relationship with God) has transformed Amy's life in a positive way. She is thankful that the Good News of Jesus opened her eyes to the desperate plight that she was in and provided a solution. Thus, believing in Jesus is cause for celebration. Second, the logic of evangelical christology can plant seeds of anxiety in the mind of an ordinary believer, when somebody like Amy begins to worry about the eternal destiny of unbelieving family members. Eric Stoddart observes in his evaluation of research on the pastoral implications of the doctrine of hell in a Scottish context, "Each evangelical sermon that posits personal relationship with Christ as vital for salvation re-enforces the anxiety that *my* loved one is in danger."[31] Amy is not being exposed to evangelical christology in the sermons at First Baptist, but her inherited evangelical outlook generates sufficient anxiety to diminish her sense of joy. Here, surely, is a significant

[31] Eric Stoddart, "Hell in Scotland: A Survey of Where the Nation's Clergy Think Some Might Be Heading," *Contact* 143 (2004): 19.

pastoral dilemma that deserves careful attention. At First Baptist Church in Jamaica Plain the preaching and teaching emphasize Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom of God with a view to inspiring social activism. Following Jesus today means working for justice and peace to transform the world here and now. The christology embedded in First Baptist's congregational practices of worship and mission is not designed to answer Amy's questions, but, inadvertently, it ignores them. Such a lacuna is in no way intended to be pastorally insensitive. Most likely, it is a matter of simply not knowing the dilemma exists.

Hermeneutical Lens: An Evangelical Cognitive Schema

Each of the three types of everyday christology identified in "Living with Jesus" owes its unique shape to a particular conceptual framework or hermeneutic lens through which the Jesus story is filtered. The Jesus story is never communicated from a neutral perspective, but is always related in terms that are significant to the storyteller and make sense of the story to him or her. Ordinary believers articulate the Jesus story by drawing upon particular words and concepts that structure the story and inform their understanding and practice of the Christian life. The three everyday christologies evident in the congregations studied in "Living with Jesus" stem from different hermeneutics or ways of interpreting the Bible.

The Jesus story characteristic of evangelical christology is appropriated and reinforced in the experience of people interviewed for "Living with Jesus" within two main contexts: evangelical churches, or churches with some vestiges of an evangelical

past like First Baptist, and evangelical student ministries such as Campus Crusade for Christ, Inter-Varsity Fellowship, and Cultural Connection. The autobiographical narratives of ordinary believers at Ruggles and First Baptist that incorporate evangelical christologies reflect what can be called a "Plan of Salvation". The Jesus story is taken to be fundamentally about God seeking relationship with individual human beings alienated from the divine presence by sin. Gordon Lynch distils a cognitive schema or conceptual framework embedded in evangelical culture. He argues that evangelical Christianity has a particular discourse, a set of words and concepts, that helps evangelical Christians make sense of their lives with reference to a conceptual framework or cognitive schema, which "is a way of talking about the world that begins with God, or Jesus, and the way that God has acted towards me."[32] He represents the evangelical schema diagrammatically:

GOD/JESUS

Grace	↓	Love	↑
Loving	↓	Praise/Worship	↑
Redeeming	↓	Gratitude	↑
Healing	↓	Obedience	↑
Source of all goodness	↓	Discipleship[33]	↑

[32] Gordon Lynch, *Losing My Religion? Moving on from Evangelical Faith* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2003), 10.

[33] Ibid.

This evangelical cognitive schema is framed in terms of God's interaction with an individual. Lynch expands on the discourse that is represented in diagram form:

> - God, the source of all goodness, loves me and through an undeserved act of grace he has chosen (through Christ's sacrificial death) to save and redeem me from sin, death, and hell.
> - God is a loving and positive authority, who continues to offer healing, comfort and guidance in my life, and should be the focus of my worship.
> - My appropriate response to God's loving action should be one of love and praise for his saving grace and of commitment to live as an active and faithful disciple.[34]

According to Lynch's summary, Jesus is defined by what he does through his sacrificial death to save the individual believer from sin, death, and hell, a point borne out by interviews, although all the interviewees preferred to place the emphasis on the positive gain of entering into a relationship with God. Multiple variations of this schema proliferate in the evangelical sub-culture. It is expressed in the preaching and worship of evangelical churches, the evangelistic ministries of evangelical parachurch ministries like Campus Crusade for Christ, and teaching programs like the Alpha Course that introduce the Christian faith to inquirers.

The parallels between Lynch's evangelical cognitive schema and the evangelical christology described in "Living with Jesus" are self-evident. First, both begin with God and affirm God's love for the individual Christian. The idea that God loves human beings (loves me as an individual) is a powerful one that has the

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[34] Gordon Lynch, "Beyond Conversion: Exploring the Process of Moving Away from Evangelical Christianity," in *Finding and Losing Faith: Studies in Conversion*, ed. Christopher Partridge and Helen Reid (Bletchley, Milton Keynes: Paternoster Press, 2006), 30. Bullets are original to the text.

potential to inspire courage and hope. Second, they offer a clear structure erected on the death of Jesus to focus "emotional and spiritual energy."[35] The evangelical understanding of God, Jesus, and human beings conceives "our spiritual lives as an act of receiving and reciprocating God's love for us."[36] Such an idea enables different types of people to come together in common cause (worship and mission) and provides spiritual direction in life. These ideas together form the heart of the conceptual framework within which ordinary believers operating with an evangelical christology understand Jesus Christ and the practice of the Christian life. The evident simplicity and resilience of this framework does not foreclose the possibility of asking questions and wondering if it is comprehensive or not. The relation of the individual to God is the key component. In effect, the evangelical cognitive schema, which is expressed in many forms such as *The Four Spiritual Laws*, *The Bridge to Life* booklet, and the Alpha Course, functions as a lens through which the story of Jesus recorded in the New Testament is absorbed. It offers a way of making sense of the Jesus story found in the Gospels.

Although Baptists are not a creedal tradition within Christianity the impact of imbibing a theology shaped by an evangelical cognitive schema is not dissimilar. The effect is one of emphasizing what is to be believed about Jesus Christ rather than on attending to the Gospel narratives of Jesus' life and teachings (especially as found in

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[35] Gordon Lynch, *Losing My Religion? Moving on from Evangelical Faith* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2003), 11.

[36] Ibid., 11-12.

the Synoptic Gospels), a criticism made by the Anabaptist tradition of the churches of Christendom.[37] In displacing the story or, at least, major aspects of the story of Jesus Christ from the center of theology and practice, Baptists risk undermining a doctrine dear to their hearts, the Lordship or rule of Jesus over their lives. The character and will of Jesus is most clearly displayed in the Gospels contained in the New Testament, not principally in ecumenical or evangelical doctrinal statements about his person and work. Evangelical Baptists can learn from the Anabaptist tradition, which accentuates the centrality of Jesus Christ and the importance of following after him.[38] Anabaptists challenge evangelical Baptists to reckon with the Gospel imperative for transformation of character, a point that reverberates through McClendon's *Systematic Theology*.

Everyday Practices

Evangelical Christians are normally assumed to be committed to the practice of witnessing to the Gospel to seek converts. Several interviewees admitted that they struggle to evangelize friends and family, because, in their experience, the ideas of sin, hell, and substitutionary atonement elicit skepticism and resistance to the Gospel. Corinne, who worships at Ruggles, captures this dilemma in her explanation of the cross and comment about the difficulties she experiences in witnessing to the Gospel:

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[37] Stuart Murray, *Post-Christendom* (Bletchley, Milton Keynes: Paternoster Press, 2004), 334-339.

[38] Nigel Wright, "Spirituality as Discipleship: the Anabaptist Heritage," in *Under the Rule of Christ: Dimensions of Baptist Spirituality*, ed. Paul S. Fiddes (Oxford and Macon, GA: Regent's Park College with Smyth and Helwys, 2008), 82-85,88-89.

> *Corinne (RBC 12)*
> *God chose to send Christ as a sacrifice, as a substitute for us. And explaining that to people is really hard because you sort of have to think – do people believe in sin? . . . And so, I think you kind of have to start there. And like, well, you know, most people don't have a belief in sin and most of my colleague friends definitely don't have a belief in sin, because they're all like psychologists and stuff. . . . But, you know, I would try to come up with language that would make sense to whoever I was talking to, which is challenging.*

Evangelical christology presupposes a worldview that acknowledges the existence of a God who holds people accountable and claims the human condition is marred by wilful rebellion against God. Corinne tries to find ways of talking about the Gospel and Christian convictions that don't rely upon traditional Christian terminology to communicate Christian convictions intelligibly and palatably. But the concept of sin remains a troubling concept for many as Mark Biddle candidly acknowledges when he asks, "How can the church speak about sin as wilful rebellion against God to people who lead substantially moral but spiritually indifferent lives?"[39] An inability to answer this question plausibly or to find another bridge from the story of Jesus to connect with everyday lives risks paralyzing witness to the Gospel in the North America and globally.[40] The doctrine of sin is hard to communicate because people perceive it to be morally condemnatory and intellectually difficult to comprehend. The Gospel, which is personally liberating for the Christian, creates a perceived stumbling block to his or her attempts to witness to the saving work of Jesus Christ.

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[39] Mark E. Biddle, *Missing the Mark: Sin and Its Consequences in Biblical Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005), 17.

[40] Herbert Hoefer, "Gospel Proclamation of the Ascended Lord," *Missiology: An International Review* 33, no. 4 (2005): 434-449; Brian Stanley, "Conversion to Christianity: The Colonization of the Mind," *International Review of Mission* 92, no. 366 (2003): 315-331.

Corinne's experience, although shared with almost all the people interviewed at Ruggles born and raised in the United States, is not the total picture. The international students that participated in "Living with Jesus" all came from backgrounds marked by atheism, agnosticism, or alternative religious traditions, including Buddhism and Islam. The story of Jesus, when communicated to the international students interviewed at Ruggles, introduced concepts such as sin and salvation, which were new to them. Yet, these categories of thought, ultimately, were received and assented to by these international students. The evangelical presentation of the Jesus story made sense to them; it is the story they communicate to people from the same cultural backgrounds as themselves.

Exemplarist Christology

In everything do to others as you would have them do to you, for this is the law and the prophets. (Matthew 7:12)

The Story of Jesus

Before proceeding to evaluate the teaching, death, resurrection, and identity of Jesus in exemplarist christiology, it will be helpful to present a summary overview of the story of Jesus from this perspective based on what I heard in interviews. The story of Jesus that undergirds exemplarist christology centers on his humanity, life, and ministry. He was a first century Jewish Rabbi, a man of flesh and blood, familiar with human hopes and fears, strengths and weaknesses. According to the exemplarist narrative, Jesus empathizes with human beings in the midst of their frailty and

suffering. Above all else, Jesus embodies love as moral compassion and so helps people in practical ways. He is the outstanding example of what it means to be truly human in relation to God and people. David speaks passionately about Jesus being an example that shows him what to do:

> *<u>David (FBCJP 11)</u>*
> *And, so Jesus is my example and I distil out of all the sayings – everything he said – the things he did, and I try to distil out of each of these sayings that are telling me something, that makes sense logically for me to go do. That's what he means to me . . . I don't know how you come to believe that this is God himself or how that works or how he can be saying, "My Father in heaven"? Are they two different people? . . . So as an engineer . . . I had to figure out what I was supposed to be doing rather than talking about. . . . So, you know, eventually, I said I've got to do something that's direct care of people and so I got into this nursing program, which is a whole story in itself.*

God inspires Jesus and works through him to share divine love and mercy with those he meets in first century Palestine, especially the excluded, weak, and marginalized. Jesus is found in the company of the sick, prostitutes, and tax collectors; he keeps company with the outcasts, shunned and reviled. Jesus shows love for people that nobody else cares about.

A principle of reciprocal love stands at the heart of Jesus' message; love your neighbor as you love yourself. Ultimately, Jesus died because he stuck to the principle of loving others as he believed God wanted him to love them and refused to accede to the pressure placed upon him by the religious and political authorities of his generation that were offended by the way in which he extended love to the people that were disreputable in their eyes:

> *Carol (FBCJP 15)*
> *Another, I think, important concept about Christ and what I identify with is that, you know, he wasn't always, obviously, the most popular guy. He stood up for what he believed in and he did it even when he faced tremendous backlash from politicians and from some family at times. . . . So think that he's an important hero figure in a sense for that reason.*

Jesus is principally about loving people as individuals not initiating some broad movement for social transformation in first century Palestine. He gave his all to be an example of what it means to hold fast to God's will to love others. His death inspires his followers to live and die in the same way. Mystery surrounds the disappearance of Jesus' body and the Gospel accounts of the empty tomb. Two broad steams of thought on resurrection exist. The first is perplexed and confused by the resurrection, recognizes that it is a central teaching of Christianity, but does not know what to do with it. The second accepts the resurrection along traditional lines as the raising of Jesus bodily from the dead and sees it as confirmation that there is life after death. Both streams of understanding speak of Jesus in the present tense, but in different ways. According to exemplarist christology, the goal of the Christian life is to practice a reciprocal form of love expressed as a radical moral compassion for others. Christian discipleship is thus focused very much on life here and now.

The Teaching of Jesus

When asked to summarize the heart of Jesus' teaching, interviewees adhering to an exemplarist christology advanced various forms of the reciprocal moral principle of the Golden Rule: love your neighbor as yourself and do unto others as you would have them do unto you. The precise content of what it means to love one's

neighbor is not specified in concrete terms by exemplarist christology, but is broadly construed as moral compassion that meets peoples' needs. David's imagination has been so captivated by this moral principle and Jesus' embodiment of it that towards the end of his working life he felt compelled to abandon a career as an engineer and retrain and pursue a career in a caring profession. As his comment below indicates, he is concerned that time is running out to comply with the moral imperative voiced by Jesus as he seeks to follow him as a disciple in everyday life today. The human-ward and this-worldly emphasis at the heart of this reading of Jesus' message is plainly seen in the following representative comments elicited when interviewees were asked to describe the core of Jesus' teaching:

Lydia (FBCJP 3)
Love one another.

Bernice (FBCJP 10)
I think the message of Jesus Christ is to help each other and to help people who are in need.

David (FBCJP 11)
So it means having compassion for people's needs, their suffering, and I'm always frustrated that I'm running out of years here.

Carol (FBCJP 15)
Ultimately, I think the core of Jesus' message was to focus your energy toward people from a place of love . . . that essentially God the Father is with you on your side if you are extending yourself in a loving way.

Marva (FBCJP 20)
Live the Christian life. Do unto others as you would do unto them.

Christine (FBCJP 23)
That you should treat people the way you would like to be treated.

The absence of any reference to entering into a relationship with God and loving God is very striking in contrast to evangelical christology. An explicit exhortation to look beyond the tangible this-worldly fact of humanity to the transcendent reality of God is missing, but God has not completely disappeared. Carol interprets the teaching of Jesus to mean that God is inherently on the side of those who direct love to their fellow human beings. An appeal to the nature and purpose of God legitimizes the Golden Rule and action that flows out of obedience to it. Exemplarist christology presupposes God's essential nature to consist of love, which has implications for how the followers of Jesus are to live their lives. God directs love towards human beings and the followers of Jesus are required to do the same.

The Death of Jesus

Exemplarist christology does not view the death of Jesus as an objective transaction for the forgiveness of sins. The language of sacrifice is utilized, but not in the sense of a payment that frees human beings from a guilt, penalty, and bondage that otherwise they are powerless to effect for themselves. Rather, the death of Jesus is an event that inspires the human heart to respond in like manner. Jesus was willing to die for what he believed in, namely, the compassionate love of God for people. The cross stands as an illustration of a principle, an act of self-denial for a greater good (God) and an example of how to love others. In exemplarist christology, the

cross exerts a moral influence on the person who reads or hears the passion narrative about Jesus in the Gospels:

> *Lydia (FBCJP 3)*
> *I can look at it as an incredible example of sacrifice of a human person who has done no wrong, willingly going through that sort of torture and pain and so on, supposedly for other people as an example.*
>
> *Bernice (FBCJP 10)*
> *He basically shows what we need to grow as human beings. Basically, you know, we get crucified sometimes and we have to be born again. Basically, we follow his work.*
>
> *Christine (FBCJP 23)*
> *I would say that it was a case of a sacrifice made for love of something greater than himself. You know, was there a cross? Was there all of those things? I don't know. I mean I believe that because that's what I learned and heard my entire religious career. I'm not one who, uh, takes the Bible literally. But I would say that he made sacrifices to emphasize that how you like to be treated is how you treat other people.*

For Bernice, the death of Jesus on the cross embodies a principle of growth for human maturity. We must all, at times, die to self in order to be "born again", to be renewed and to grow in our humanity. The pattern of Jesus' life is a pattern his followers must expect to follow if they are to progress in being human. We are to love God, the transcendent reality beyond our mortal lives, and serve others.

Exemplarist christology is perplexed by the theory of substitutionary atonement:

> *Lydia (FPBCJ 3)*
> *I don't know that I quite understand the 'had to die for me' piece. I'm still puzzled over that.*
>
> *Liliana (FBCJP 7)*
> *I get stuck when I hear that, because I think in that area I have not solved all my questions. Why did God have to develop the plan of killing or to be killed*

when with his power he could have done something different that will bring to humanity that he is God?

David (FBCJP 11)
So – the death of Jesus – I take that as the story tells it. Jesus made a strong stand on what needed to be going through people about love and refuted a lot of the rules and regulations and the practice of the church. And he knew that he was going to get into serious trouble. In the end he was executed for disturbing the established church. . . . That Jesus came to appease the Father who was ticked off that man turned his perfect creation and had to be satisfied, I can't understand that at all, that whole thing.

Notions of substitutionary atonement jar with exemplarist christological assumptions about God. To some, like Liliana, substitutionary atonement is confusing; why does God who is so powerful need to instigate a plan that entails killing somebody? The implicit assumption of many interviewees is that God can forgive without recourse to the cross. David clearly finds the idea of Jesus dying to appease God inconceivable. His notion of God does not allow for God sending Jesus intentionally to die for the forgiveness of sins. David can conceive of Jesus courageously resisting the institutional religion of his day and making a stand for authentic love over and against empty rules and regulations that results in rejection and death.

Furthermore, exemplarist christology cannot conceive God punishing people for eternity.

Liliana (FBCJP 7)
At this moment Jesus is such a reality to myself, in my life. . . . I still have pains for those that might call themselves against Jesus or against God. I do not conceive a terrible Father, you see. I do not conceive anyone suffering for eternity in hell. I cannot conceive God's punishment that way. . . . I won't say if a person had not become a part of God's life now – God might have a special way to find for that person, but it's not going to be through suffering. Do you think we need any more suffering afterwards?

Liliana is mindful of the reality of suffering in human experience in this earthly life. She cannot conceive that God imposes an eternity of suffering in hell on persons that have never heard the Gospel or choose deliberately to reject it. Instead, Lydia imagines God finding a "special way" to include those who "had not become a part of God's life now." To her mind God's love is inclusive and generous rather than exclusive and punitive.

Katy, a Southern Baptist in origin, mused that, although she had been taught Jesus died for the sins of the world, she no longer held this conviction with certainty:

> *Katy (FBCJP 12)*
> *I'm not sure, but I certainly used to think that Christ died for the sins of mankind and that because he died on the cross people could be forgiven for their sins. And, I think now, I don't know whether . . . I'm not sure.*

Everybody, like Katy, that articulated an exemplarist christology had been introduced to the idea that Jesus died on the cross for the forgiveness of sins in their initial exposure to Christianity. However, when asked about the resurrection Katy firmly confessed her belief that Jesus was raised bodily from the dead. At the time of interview, her interpretation of the cross was being renegotiated, but her understanding of the nature and meaning of the resurrection remained stable. She was not alone in registering a mixture of stability and transition in her understanding of Jesus Christ. Indeed, all those operating with an exemplarist christology had changed or were in a process of adapting their outlook on Jesus and his meaning for their lives. Stephen, for example, acquired a new appreciation of the cross from

watching Mel Gibson's controversial depiction of Jesus' final hours in *The Passion of the Christ* (2004).

> *Stephen (FBCJP 16)*
> *I mean, you know, watching 'The Passion of the Christ' I never really dealt with the death before. I never really pictured him being whipped and all this. I never, I just didn't, I chose not to think about that. I focused more on the resurrection that he rose, that he's around, that's what I focused on.*

The death of Jesus simply had not factored very much in Stephen's everyday christology until the recent past. He attributes this lacuna to his background in the Orthodox tradition of Christianity, which he feels is more interested in the risen Jesus.[41] The impression he has is that the death of Jesus for the forgiveness of sins is a peculiarly Protestant preoccupation and alien to the Orthodox tradition that he grew up in. A product of popular culture, a movie, compels Stephen to think more seriously about the cross and its significance for his faith. Everyday christology is not necessarily fixed and immutable.

The Resurrection

Exemplarist christology manifests a great deal of consistency in thinking about the cross; it acknowledges the fact of the cross, is skeptical about theories of substitutionary atonement, and regards the death of Jesus as an act of love exerting a moral influence that inspires his followers to imitate his example. However, diversity

[41] Philip is decidedly at odds with the Orthodox tradition in that he does nor believe Jesus is God, but views him as an intermediary between God and human beings rather like Old Testament prophets, saints of the church, and Mary the mother of Jesus. For a brief summary of Orthodox christology see Peter Bouteneff, "Orthodox Tradition," in *Jesus: The Complete Guide*, ed. Leslie Houlden (London: Continuum, 2005), 649-651.

is apparent in exemplarist christological perspectives on the resurrection, which is perceived as much more mysterious and difficult than the cross to comprehend. Just over half of the interviews reflecting an exemplarist christology at First Baptist (seven out of thirteen interviews) found the resurrection difficult to talk about and demonstrated a great deal of tentativeness in their thoughts and feelings about a key element of the Jesus story recorded in the New Testament. However all thirteen exemplarist christological interviewees talked about Jesus in the present tense, albeit with different understandings of exactly what it meant to speak about Jesus and their everyday lives.

David offered the most radical perspective on the resurrection, when he suggests that it is, in effect, surplus to requirements in the story of Jesus:

> *<u>David (FBCJC 11)</u>*
> *Did that have to happen for us to have Christianity? See, in my mind, no. The story is complete to me without that . . . Easter and the resurrection confuse me.*

David wrestles with any notion of a bodily resurrection. His solution to the confusion and perplexity caused by the New Testament accounts of the resurrection is to discard the whole idea as an unnecessary appendix to the Jesus story, which in David's view reaches a fitting conclusion in Jesus' death. He echoes the interviewees at Ruggles who regarded the resurrection as an add-on to the work of Jesus upon the cross, although evangelicals emphasized that the resurrection is important in establishing the divine identity of Jesus.

Richard and Cecilia "don't know" if the resurrection happened or not. Both acknowledge that the resurrection is a Christian teaching they are supposed to believe, but it flies in the face of "current skepticism" about Christianity in the public domain. They each reflect a tension between reason and faith. Richard has questions relating to the content and authority of the Bible because of the human involvement in the composition and collation of the books of the Bible:

> <u>Richard (FBCJP 19)</u>
> *I don't know and I'm at peace not knowing. I know I'm supposed to according to certain beliefs. I just have too much, uh, current skepticism in books and paper and the assemblage of the Bible.*

> <u>Cecilia (FBCJP 21)</u>
> *Well, once again, I think it happened because I have to think it happened. Did it actually happen? I don't know. I don't know. I know what we're supposed to believe. I know it makes me feel better to believe it. But do I really, really, really believe it? Actually not that, I mean, I don't know. I would like to think so. Once again, intellectually it's kind of hard to fathom. But, you know, I can, I can, once again, I can go there from a faith standpoint.*

It is impossible to say whether or not Richard and Cecilia's position will remain permanently defined by what they "don't know", but both were reluctant to be any more definite about the nature and meaning of the resurrection when interviewed. They illustrate a kind of faith content to live with uncertainty and mystery.

Some exemplarists find their own ways to understand this part of the Jesus story. Carol makes sense of the resurrection as a way of talking about the creative power of spirit that can bestow new life to a broken, expired body:

> <u>Carol (FBCJP 15)</u>
> *My understanding of the story is that he was able to triumph over death and, you know, my logical mind wants to review it and wants to say, you know,*

> *"Maybe he had been in some type of coma," you know, something like that. But, ultimately, you know, our belief is that, you know, it was a, it was the triumph of spirit over the body in terms of the body was broken and then was healed completely in the grave and was brought back to life. So that's my view of it, that's my view of the resurrection, that it was the triumph of spirit over the body.*

A rational explanation for the reappearance of Jesus following the cross is that he lapsed into a coma, but, ultimately, Carol affirms a bodily resurrection from the dead and attributes such a remarkable outcome to the work of spirit. The resurrection "was the triumph of spirit over the body." Carol's comments reflect a dualism between body and spirit, but in the sense of two principles or realities; spirit proves to be more powerful and creative in Jesus when confronted by the weakness and mortality associated with death.

For Lydia, the resurrection is more about the spiritual experience of the disciples following the death of Jesus then the raising of Jesus bodily from the dead:

> *<u>Lydia (FBCJP 3)</u>*
> *I don't know that I'm totally convinced in my own mind that that was an actual physical happening. I think that that was part of the spiritual experience of the people who saw him, however they saw him after the crucifixion. I know that it's supposed to represent re-birth and a chance for all of us human beings to go on. But I don't know that, well, I'll just stop there.*

Lydia knows the resurrection is symbolic of "re-birth and a chance for all of us human beings to go on" (beyond death), but is cautious about endorsing the prospect of life after death.

Although Marva, like Lydia, is not altogether convinced that the resurrection of Jesus was bodily in nature she thinks it does point to the reality of "life beyond death":

> *Marva (FBCJP 20)*
> *I mean that's the story. No, more in his spirit. I'm not sure bodily, necessarily, as the story reads. But, certainly, that there is life after death. What we live today is not your whole life. But there is the whole eternal life. All of those people that I have shared that are so much, have been so much part of my life, I very much look forward to an eternal life and an opportunity to see them again.*

The resurrection is thus reinterpreted primarily as a sign of hope that guarantees the survival of the self beyond death.

The overall impression given by those who expressed uncertainty about the bodily resurrection of Jesus is that they would like to believe it was true, but struggle to do so because it does not fit into the rational worldview they inhabit in everyday life. Reason struggles to embrace the resurrection, but faith, potentially can. However, there is recognition of Jesus as some kind of continuing presence and belief that the teaching of the resurrection points to a hope for life beyond death.

A few exemplarists were less tentative. Katy and Stephen believe in the bodily resurrection of Jesus. She sees it as a sign validating his ministry, confirming the truth of his teaching, and verifying that Jesus really shows us who God is:

> *Katy (FBCJP 12)*
> *Physical resurrection and ascension into heaven, and I believe all that happened and I think that it kind of proved or showed people that his message was true, that he was holy and that the things he taught were right and good, that he was really showing who God was.*

Katy is hesitant about affirming her inherited evangelical soteriology, but convinced that the resurrection is to be believed. She gives no hint of any conflict between faith and reason over this latter conviction. Her everyday christology is a kind of hybrid encompassing elements of both evangelical and exemplarist christologies.

Stephen, on the other hand, also espouses the bodily resurrection of Jesus, but this does not imply, for him, that Jesus is divine:

> *Julian*
> *Do you understand the resurrection to be a bodily resurrection?*
>
> *Stephen (FBCJP 16)*
> *Yes, yeah, that's exactly - I take it literally. . . . I love Jesus, I mean, as I love my brother, anybody in my family, but I just never thought of Jesus as God.*

The research for "Living with Jesus" suggests that scope exists within the exemplarist christological perspective for disagreement over the "details" of what actually happened on the third day following the death of Jesus. Five broad categories are present within the varieties of exemplarist christology reflected in the data. First, the resurrection is doubted, but Jesus is spoken of in the present tense as a spiritual presence in the life of the believer. Second, the resurrection is re-interpreted to mean that spirit triumphs over the body and Jesus is conceived as a diffuse spiritual presence. Third, the resurrection describes and makes sense of the experience of the disciples following the death of Jesus rather than declaring that Jesus rose from the dead. Fourth, the resurrection is not about the individual known as Jesus of Nazareth, it is a promise of life after death. Fifth, a more traditional reading of the resurrection

interprets it as a bodily resurrection and Jesus is viewed as a person who is alive and accessible to the individual believer.

The Identity of Jesus

Perhaps the most striking feature of the exemplarist christological data is that just over half of the interviews express difficulty with the notion of a bodily resurrection, but continue to speak of Jesus in the present tense. An exchange with David illustrates this phenomenon as he describes how he feels that he does not need the resurrection but speaks passionately about the place of Jesus in his everyday life:

> *Julian*
> *There seems to be a tension in what you are saying. On the one hand, with reference to the resurrection, you seem content to say, 'I don't understand it, it's a mystery too difficult to grasp,' and on the other hand you are affirming in some sense, again that you can't explain, that you have experienced Jesus present and active in your life.*
>
> *David (FBCJP 11)*
> *Yes. That's a good way to put it. That's how its been working for the last twenty years, yeah. I wish I had had more of that earlier. . . . I just don't have enough time to do all the thinking and pull all of this together, so I had to simplify this and at the moment I don't need the resurrection. I mean, I do exactly the thing you just described. I certainly carry Jesus with me. Pray to him. Talk to him. That's my picture of God . . . .my picture of God is Jesus Christ.*

Similarly, Richard and Cecilia, who both declare that they "don't know" whether or not the resurrection occurred, both speak of Jesus in the present tense. Richard talks about Jesus as a person, but Cecilia thinks of the continuing presence of Jesus as kind of diffuse spiritual presence or agency:

Richard (FBCJP 19)
I think Jesus is in heaven. I think Jesus is God. Uh, however, Jesus got there, if he truly emerged from the scene, loved ones or not, that doesn't matter to me. I don't think about it. . . . I don't take a completely scientific view, that's for sure. But I'm just not sure what I believe about that. I know it's not a good answer. I'm not saying I don't believe in the resurrection, the ascension…and I'm not saying that I do believe it.

Cecilia (FBCJP 21)
He's a spirit. It's the spirit of Jesus. But do I think there are human manifestations of Jesus through people? Absolutely. And I, you know, I see the work of Jesus in people and things all the time. But . . . what I haven't really mentioned is that I sort of interchanged God and Jesus. You know, sometimes it's easier for me to talk about God or to pray to God or to thank God or to see God in people and God in certain things. It's a little bit more challenging for me to see Jesus than to say Jesus. I don't know why that is.

When asked to comment on the risen Jesus, Lydia refers to her personal experience:

Lydia (FBCJP 3)
He's a feeling of otherness, a feeling that I am never entirely alone, that there is a spiritual person.

To speak of the risen Jesus is to describe a sense of "otherness," the follower of Jesus is never completely bereft of company. Lydia attempts to describe an experience difficult to conceptualize and express in words. Although she is skeptical about the possibility of a bodily resurrection of Jesus from the dead, in the end she describes this "feeling of otherness" as a "spiritual person".

Carol distinguishes between Jesus in history, who serves as an example to follow, and Jesus in the present conceived as a continuing spiritual presence that can be embodied in different people and cultures:

> *Carol (FBCJP 15)*
> *A spirit that is present and someone whose history that I can learn from, you know. Do I think that Jesus walks today? No. Do I think that perhaps there are representations of Jesus in other cultures and other manifestation? Certainly.*

Any notion of Jesus as an individual person has disappeared from Marva's conception of Jesus beyond the cross. She does not think of Jesus as an individual person, but describes "Jesus" as a spiritual presence and agency at work in and through people:

> *Marva (FBCJP 20)*
> *As different as this might sound, Jesus is not an individual to me. Jesus comes to me through people, through relationships, through the world.*

A large element within exemplarist christology entertains grave doubts about the concept of a bodily resurrection of Jesus, but possesses a strong conviction that Jesus continues as a presence (either as an individual person or as a dynamic spiritual agency beyond personhood) in the life of an ordinary believer. A significant element within exemplarist christology espouses what might be called a spirit christology, which means that Jesus is conceived as an on-going spiritual presence in the world and human life. Jesus as a spiritual presence is not dependent upon a bodily resurrection from the dead.

David, who regards the resurrection as an unnecessary addendum to the story of Jesus, and Katy, who believes in the bodily resurrection of Jesus, both look to the Jesus of history as an example for their lives:

> *David (FBCJP 11)*
> *Jesus is somehow God or God within a man, somehow. I don't know how that works – a Trinity is a mystery to me. So, if you say, 'Do you believe it?' I will say, 'I don't know.' And so, Jesus is my example and I distil it out of*

each of these sayings that are telling me something that makes sense logically for me to go do.

<u>Katy (FBCJP 12)</u>
He is certainly still a personal figure in my life. I always, I still feel a personal relationship exists, so I still pray to God and I still see God and Jesus as really one entity that, you know, just different figures at different times, I guess. And still feel like he, that I always feel he is with me. I see him as a great historical figure that taught love and peace and acceptance, and set an example for us as someone we should believe in.

David and Katy recognize that somehow God is in Jesus or that God is Jesus without defining quite what such a claim means. He says "Jesus is somehow God or God within a man" and she states "I still see God and Jesus as really one entity . . . just different figures at different times." David is puzzled by the Trinity and does not know what to make of the doctrine. Katy admits that God and Jesus are interchangeable in her religious outlook. David and Katy both illustrate a common feature of exemplarist christology, namely, an inclination to stress the unity of God at the expense of distinctions within God. David confesses that "Jesus is somehow God or God is in Jesus," but is reluctant to probe the ontological implications of his claim. He is content to put the doctrine of the Trinity in parentheses and concentrate on following the concrete example of Jesus. Katy expresses a modalist understanding of God. Modalism is an ancient attempt to make sense of the Trinity in which the persons of the Trinity "are viewed as modes of divine action rather than as eternal and essential distinctions within the divine nature itself."[42] Katy attempts to tell the Jesus story in relation to God, but can only do so by conceptualizing each person as "just

[42] Van A. Harvey, *A Handbook of Theological Terms* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1964; reprint, New York: Touchstone, 1997), 152-153.

different figures at different times." Her "explanation" does not fit with doctrinal expositions of God that depict God consisting of three equal and eternal persons. Part of the problem Katy and exemplarists like her face is that the modern concept of "person" implies a self-contained individual, whereas the Patristic notion of "person" was more dynamic and "elastic". Katy answers McClendon's second christological question (How can monotheists tell the Jesus story?) by blurring God and Jesus or conceiving that God manifests Godself either as "God" or "Jesus" at any given point in time, but cannot be both simultaneously. David and Katy are not alone in associating Jesus in some sense with God or attributing deity to Jesus:

> <u>*Claire (FBCJP 17)*</u>
> *He's up in heaven. He just looks down over people, watches. He's just God.*
>
> <u>*Cecelia (FBCJP 21)*</u>
> *Yes, I do. I've come a long way with that. But I mean, I want to believe that. Uh, and before, and I believed it wholeheartedly before I started reading the Bible and the Bible, you know, has definitely raised more doubts about that than, uh, solidified that point. So - fully divine and fully human? I think so.*

The one flat denial that Jesus is God is made, as previously noted, by Stephen:

> <u>*Stephen (FBCJP 16)*</u>
> *Jesus Christ is my Lord and my Savior.*
>
> *I don't, you know, I don't see him as God. God is God and that's his Son. I never thought of him as God.*
>
> *But my understanding, I think, the reason we worship and pray to Jesus, and those other saints, is as a messenger, as a go-between, not because they are God, but are go-betweens between us and God. But I guess in the Protestant faith, the reason that they worship Jesus is because he is Incarnate, God Incarnate. Is that the tradition?*

The Affective Element of Exemplarist Christology

Exemplarist christology echoes evangelical christology in its insistence that Jesus is present to the experience of ordinary believers. Jesus today is a source of friendship, guidance, and help:

> *Liliana (FBCJP 7)*
> *As a matter of fact the last twenty years that I have enjoyed more his friendship than him being a Savior, because when I felt I needed a Savior he was there. He became my Savior, but then I needed a friend, because I didn't trust almost no-one, horizontally speaking, and he became my friend whom I could talk and listen all my daily situations and ask him to guide me.*

> *Bernice (FBCJP 10)*
> *Jesus for me today is my guide, is to help me so I can go back and not when I feel sad or frustrated and need some help or I need basically to get a grip on myself, who I am and how I feel, what to do, to have hope and have help. Jesus today is a very special person right now in my life.*

Liliana, raised in an evangelical church background, where Jesus is truly human and truly divine and died for the forgiveness of sins, testifies to a change in her perception of Jesus. She related to Jesus initially as a savior, but for the last two decades of her life has related to him as a friend. A particular stream of evangelical christology is accentuated in her understanding and experience. Bernice also bears witness to a change in her understanding and experience of Jesus. She comes from a Roman Catholic background. Her perception of Jesus in the past was of a distant figure of judgment. Now Jesus is perceived to be a source of comfort, strength, and direction. He helps her through the vicissitudes of life.

These changes in perceptions of Jesus are attributed to a shift in felt needs and add weight to Tyrone Inbody's claim that christology is driven by soteriology.

Namely, the things that meet specified human needs[43] at any given point in time greatly influence what we believe about Jesus. However, needs change. Is this a problem? Do people simply need to move to a church that proclaims and practices whatever is consistent with their felt needs at any given point in time in their lives? An inherent danger in such a construal of christology or any theological conviction is that the individual human self can end up determining the shape of christological conviction according to taste or perceived need with scant regard to the Gospel.

Liliana's everyday christology has altered in accordance with her perceived felt need for Jesus to be a friend more than a savior. She started out as a follower of Jesus with a perceived need for salvation defined as deliverance from the power and penalty of sin and a guarantee of an eternity with God. Subsequently, however, Liliana's conception of Jesus and her relationship to him shifted to an experience of friendship here and now. Bernice also has a different estimation of Jesus to what she thought in the past. Liliana and Bernice show how everyday christologeis can and do change (at the very least in emphasis) with the passage of time.

Hermeneutic Lens: The Golden Rule

Exemplarist christology portrays Jesus as one who taught his fellow human beings to love one another as they love themselves and demonstrated what it means to love others. Thinking through the logical and metaphysical implications of the Jesus story is eschewed in favor of devoting one's life and energy to practical matters of

[43] Tony Walter, *All You Love is Need?* (London: Third Way Books, 1985).

care and compassion in obedience to the command and example of Jesus. The Christian life is, therefore, defined by practice rather than subscribing to particular beliefs about God and Jesus. In effect, a moral philosophy of reciprocal love (The Golden Rule) translated into practice constitutes the hermeneutic lens at work to interpret the story of Jesus in exemplarist christology. This moral philosophy, which has roots in the Bible, is typical of what Nancy Ammerman calls Golden Rule Christianity,[44] a type of Christianity common in mainline congregations in the United States, and certainly evident at First Baptist, but by no means confined to it. Golden Rule Christians direct their love primarily on a horizontal plain towards other human beings in obedience to the example and teaching set by Jesus. "Most important to Golden Rule Christians is care for relationships, doing good deeds, and looking for opportunities to provide care and comfort for people in need. Their goal is neither changing another's beliefs nor changing the whole political system."[45] Golden Rule Christianity is about practical Christianity in action. It is a rational, commonsense version of Christianity more interested in how one lives than worrying about doctrinal precision, which assumes that Jesus self-evidently demonstrates the love of God. No appeal is made to fulfilment of Old Testament promises, miraculous happenings like a virginal conception or stilling a storm, or an atoning sacrifice for sins upon the cross to bolster claims that in some sense he shows God's way to the world. The

[44] Nancy T. Ammerman, "Golden Rule Christianity: Lived Religion in the American Mainstream," in *Lived Religion in America: Toward a History of Practice*, ed. David D. Hall (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 196-206.

[45] Ibid., 203.

resurrection is perplexing and thinking about the ontological implications of the Jesus story is avoided.

Golden Rule Christianity can be introverted. "This emphasis on caring relationships tends to mean a certain narrowness in the circle of care occupied by Golden Rule Christians. Such a level of intense commitment could not be maintained over a wide domain."[46] Moral compassion is, in effect, restricted to a limited number of people. Golden Rule Christianity and the exemplarist christology at its heart finds it difficult to move outwards in mission, unlike the next type of christology to be considered, prophetic christology.

Prophetic Christology

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good new to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.
(Luke 4:18-19)

The Jesus Story according to Prophetic Christology

Prophetic christology presupposes a God of love who cares deeply for the cosmos and all human life. Human lives and human social groups are flawed and broken. Yet, God is at work in creation and human society to bring about a transformed state of affairs in which justice and peace prevail. Jesus is significant as one who reveals the love of God, a love that is radically inclusive and works for justice and peace. The teaching and example of Jesus advocated social justice on

[46] Ammerman, "Golden Rule Christianity", 205.

behalf of the poor and oppressed. He called all people everywhere to work for peace and relations of love. The teaching of Jesus is centred on the kingdom of God and the two great commands to love God and love one's neighbor. Jesus' faithfulness to the kingdom of God ultimately resulted in him being rejected by the political and religious authorities of the day. He was crucified for his loyalty to the kingdom of God. Jesus is an example to follow in daily life and in working for a more just society.

Advocates of Prophetic Christology

Prophetic christology is embedded in the congregational practices of worship and mission at First Baptist. The pastoral ministry of Ashlee Wiest-Laird is decisively shaping these practices.[47] Her husband Lance also exercises a significant input to congregational christology through the Adult Education Class on Sunday mornings, which he typically organizes and leads. Ashlee and Lance are the two people that can clearly be identified operating with prophetic christology in their daily lives. Fragments of prophetic christology are apparent in some of the everyday christologies, other than Ashlee and Lance, found at First Baptist. Henry functions with a hybrid of evangelical and prophetic christology.

Henry grew up in an unchurched background, converted to Christianity at college, and was involved in evangelical campus ministries, student groups, and

[47] The content of Ashlee Wiest-Laird's christology is explored in Chapter Five.

churches for several years. He explains how his theological horizons were expanded beyond concern for the salvation of individual souls:

> *Henry (FBCJP 14)*
> *One formative experience is actually after the Graduate Christian Fellowship drove me crazy. I ended up with the Black Christian Fellowship at MIT and that's where I - Black theology is an amazing treasure, an amazing American treasure, because I think more than so many other Christian groups it's a theology that truly understands, you know, they would read the Bible and they would see Israel and slavery for three hundred years and they would say, 'Israel was in slavery for three hundred years and then God took them out of slavery. You know this is a powerful God. This is a God who can do the same thing for us.' Lo and behold it took three hundred years and, you know, the American slavery ended. And it wasn't just the slavery, but, you know, continuing oppression, continuing discrimination, and this is a theology that has learned…to prosper and move on, you know, beyond the real hard knocks in life, and enjoy life here and now while looking forward to a better tomorrow.*

The themes of social justice and God being on the side of the oppressed that Henry identifies at the heart of Black theology resonate with the central themes embedded in the congregational practices at First Baptist, especially public worship and the Adult Education Class.

Lance Laird had primary responsibility for leading the Adult Education Class on Sundays from April to July 2006. In September 2005 the Adult Education Class had embarked upon a sequential study of the Gospel according to Mark with the aid of a Study Guide "*Say to this Mountain": Mark's Story of Discipleship*[48] written by Ched Myers and several other like-minded thinkers. Myers is a long-time campaigner for peace, social activist, lecturer, and preacher, who was taught by James

[48] Ched Myers, Marie Dennis, Joseph Nangle, OFM, Cynthia Moe-Lobeda, and Stuart Taylor, *"Say to This Mountain": Mark's Story of Discipleship* (Maryknool, NY: Orbis Books, 1996).

McClendon. "*Say to this Mountain"* is a popularization of *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus*.[49] The distinctive feature of Myers' work is a reading of the Gospel according to Mark that sets the ministry of Jesus in the social-political context of First Century Palestine. Myers insists upon a hermeneutic or method of reading the Gospel of Mark that begins with the social context Jesus lived in and treats the Gospel as a literary whole.

Hermeneutic Lens: A Social-Political Reading of Jesus in His Historical Context

The hermeneutic lens through which prophetic christology filters the Jesus story is that of a social-political analysis of Jesus in the historical context of first century Palestine. *"Say to This Mountain"* exemplifies such a reading of the Gospels. For Ashlee and Lance Laird, Henry, and Ched Myers, Jesus is a prophetic voice turning conventions upside down, siding with people oppressed by the religious, social, political, and economic structures or systems of his generation, such as the Temple in Jerusalem. Jesus speaks truth to power. The purpose of applying a social-political reading of Jesus in his historical context is not simply to gain an understanding of the past, but to discern how the ministry and message of Jesus intersects with the experience of the reader today and illuminates the immediate social-political context. Where is the evidence of the kingdom of God breaking in? Who are the oppressed that the individual follower of Jesus and the church

[49] Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988). James McClendon draws upon Myers' seminal work. See James Wm. McClendon, Jr. *Doctrine: Systematic Theology*, vol. 2 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 87, 120, 235, and 405.

corporately are called to stand alongside? Are the followers of Jesus prepared to accept the cost of following him today in the kind of path that he himself walked in the past? Prophetic Christology is not simply about an interior conversion or work of Jesus; it calls the Christian disciple to look at the world he inhabits to see where God is at work, to roll up his or her sleeves and join in, to work for justice and peace, to be welcoming and inclusive, and to make society a better place for all. Prophetic christology proceeds with a vision of the common good for all people and is willing to challenge vested interests and ideologies that promote and protect the advantage of a few.

A selection of comments made by Lance Laird in the Adult Education Class give a glimpse of how he communicates a prophetic christology and challenges participants to read the Gospels from the perspective of prophetic christology:

> *If Jesus just does interior work, have we missed the point? 4/9/06*
>
> *All forms of power will be against you. 5/28/0*
>
> *Where do I see barriers coming down? 6/4/06*
> *Where do I see social justice?*
> *Where do I see economic justice?*
> *Where are people included?*
>
> *God is a God of compassion who sides with the oppressed. 06/11/06*
> *Jesus critiqued any system of domination. 06/11/06*
> *Our call is to judge what is right. 06/11/06*
> *Where do you think following Jesus is going to lead you? 06/26/06*

Prophetic christology resonates with Henry, who has absorbed a commitment to social justice and the idea that God is on the side of the oppressed through his experience of the Black Christian Fellowship at MIT. As noted in Chapter Five,

Wiest-Laird's emphasis on the kingdom of God, social justice, inclusiveness, and working for a better community appeals to people in the congregation who believe the church must be active in the local community in Jamaica Plain. For some, like Elizabeth, prophetic christology is a new and challenging way of making sense of Jesus:

> *Julian*
> *How do you understand Jesus' death? What does that mean to you?*
>
> *Elizabeth (FBCJP 13)*
> *Well, I grew up Southern Baptist and so, I guess, a lot of my understanding of Jesus' death is all tied up in Atonement for the forgiveness of sins. And I 'm consciously trying not to talk in these kind of theological terms, that had theological meaning to theological people, like atonement for sins and that sort of thing, but my background is so tied up in that that I really don't know how to say things without it.*
>
> *Julian*
> *When you think about that perspective how do you find your experience at First Baptist JP in terms of the emphasis that's put upon who Jesus is and why he's important?*
>
> *Elizabeth*
> *It's interesting. It's very different from what I'm used to. JP has much more – it's much more, maybe sociological, maybe sociological is not the right word, but there is a kind of sociological overlay to the theology, there's a political overlay to the theology there. I'm not sure that that's a bad thing. I'm finding it very interesting, because I'm not used to that, but the Sunday School lessons that we've had at JP and Lance will do the study of, is it Matthew or Mark?*
>
> *Julian*
> *Mark.*
>
> *Elizabeth*
> *Mark. And we tend to get into topics that are very current events, topics tied into the study of the story, the study of Scripture, and that has been interesting to me, and the way that he weaves all of that together. I remember one of the lessons that we had and we ended up talking about the,*

> *essentially the disenfranchisement of the poor in Jamaica Plain who are losing, I don't know if you remember that conversation, but they're losing their ability to find housing in the area, because the Yuppies and the business people are moving and buying coming in and buying places like this one. And where do the people go? Where do they live? So it has made me think about some aspects of life and how they would be viewed in a religious sense that I have not really thought about before. So it challenges me.*

Ashlee and Lance Laird are advocates for prophetic christology at First Baptist. The christology they operate with in their daily lives is the christology that increasingly shapes the congregational practices at First Baptist. It is clear, based on the data generated by interviews, that the majority of ordinary believers at First Baptist exhibit evangelical and exemplarist christologies, and some interesting examples of hybridization, in a context where prophetic christology is the understanding of Jesus increasingly communicated and commended through congregational practices of worship and mission.

Embodied Christology: Practices of Faith

Since "Living with Jesus" is a study of lived religion it is appropriate to explore how ordinary believers actually practice their faith. What do lived christologies look like in the context of First Baptist Church in Jamaica Plain and Ruggles Baptist Church? Where in the tangible, embodied stuff of life do people perceive Jesus to be present and active?

Interviewees across the two congregations and in all three categories of lived christology spoke of practices that seemed to enable a sense of the presence of Jesus

in their lives.[50] Six broad domains of human activity stand out as places where people claim to encounter Jesus with particular intensity: community, spiritual disciplines, nature, physical exercise, work, and finally compassion, caring, and hospitality.

Jesus and Community. Angela (FBCJP 1) spoke of a sense of Jesus being with her through most of her life. However, her baptism at age ten or eleven stood out as a particular moment of intensity that she recalled quite vividly. For Angela, the celebration of communion in the company of fellow believers at First Baptist is very significant for her perceived experience of Jesus in the present. "I think that's when I feel his presence the most . . . his love, his grace and just being . . . with me in spite of my shortcomings and sins." She articulated a common conviction among the cradle Baptists rooted in the American Baptist Churches (USA) at First Baptist that the network of friendships and relationships within the congregation was especially important to their spiritual experience. She observed that, "Just in general being able to interact in the fellowship of believers" constituted a practice that seemed to help her experience Jesus in her life. Her conviction that Christian fellowship was crucial to experiencing Jesus was echoed by Henry, a young adult member of the church (FBCJP 14), "I think Christian community does make Jesus seem nearer to me."

Jesus and Spiritual Disciplines. At Ruggles, Kimberly (RBC 1), recalled her Catholic upbringing and attending services on Holy Thursday, when the priest would wash the feet of twelve people, and being present at vigils, communal events of

[50] The examination of embodied christology focuses primarily on exemplarist and evangelical christologies, since there are only two clear cut examples of prophetic christology out of forty four interviews in total.

worship when she felt closer to God and Jesus. Today, Kimberly practices the Christian faith within an evangelical context. She finds that, "Prayer draws me closer to Jesus . . . and worship, whether I sing in church or on my own at times." She also notes that reading scripture aloud, rather than simply reading it silently in her head seems to deepen awareness of Jesus in her life. "Sometimes, I think, by hearing my voice I can imagine God speaking to me. I feel closer to Jesus that way." Emily (RBC 11) concurs with Kimberly on the value of reading scripture out loud, "Because the scripture, as the Word of God, when they are spoken out loud, there is more power." Kimberly speaks for many when she alludes to the importance of music to her spirituality, "I do feel closer to him [Jesus] also when I . . . am just listening to music, not necessarily Christian music. Often, I just listen to classical music." For Maxwell (RBC 10), contemporary worship music played while driving in his car helps him, "I always meet with Jesus then."

Spiritual disciplines practiced by interviewees included Bible reading (sometimes with the help of one year through the Bible programs and study guides to explain the meaning of Bible passages), prayer, fasting, keeping a journal, participating in a small group Bible study, and attending public worship. Alex (RBC 16) expressed the conviction that engaging in public worship, praying, reading he Bible and talking about Jesus to others helped him to get closer to Jesus. "I think these are all real things that, when I do them regularly, I feel the most connected to Jesus."

Some interviewees reflected on how their practice of spiritual disciplines had changed:

> *Philip (RBC 6)*
> *I used to do a lot of journaling. I've gotten away from that. Some other things have been particularly meaningful to me. Lately, its been writing. Rather than journaling I've been writing a novel, but its on a Christian theme. . . . I think writing the novel for the last three years has been dealing in a huge way with lots and lots of problems at once. I deal with betrayal of trusts and honesty and things like that.*

Brenda (RBC 9) has found that her practice of spirituality has altered, in part, because her children have grown up. "Having the quiet, having the peaceful, quiet atmosphere [at home]" has become a valued ingredient in her practice of the life of faith. She reads the Bible and prays daily. Meditating on the Psalms, especially Psalm 37, and Proverbs is very important to her. Brenda likes to sit at a table with candles and meditate, "Just sit and reflect, which is just starting to happen more for me than when I was raising five kids and was mostly talking to God while I'm doing the dishes, you know."

Jesus and Nature. A connection between nature and encountering Jesus was shared across evangelical and exemplarist christologies, Miriam (RBC 20), when asked what practices, if any, helped her to draw closer to Jesus offered up prayer and Bible reading like many of her fellow evangelicals at Ruggles, but also stressed the value of hikes and bike rides to her spirituality. "Nature does it for me." She described a sense of being awestruck at the wonder and beauty of the natural world. "So being outside and physical activity" are both factors in her life.

At First Baptist, Marva celebrates the time-honored New England practice of vacating Metropolitan Boston for New Hampshire:

> *Marva (FBCJP 20)*
> *I take summer in New Hampshire and it's almost like a two-month retreat for me. . . . It's not just running away, it's renewal and we have a place in New Hampshire that is, has been a part of my life for fifty years. . . . And I'll tell you, when I take my kayak out on that lake, and whether it's a sunset or sunrise . . . it's those moments when it's okay, now I am connected to Jesus.*

Nature occupies a significant place for some ordinary believers, prompting a sense of awe and otherness.

Jesus and Physical Exercise. Maxwell (RBC 10) finds it easiest to pray when he goes for an early morning run. "I find that's a time that, for some reason that's easier for me to commune with Jesus than just sitting still in my living room or something." Janice (RBC 18) combines jogging and worship music. "When I run or use my CD player it's always worship music and it's generally a few different CDs that I'll use. If I go for a run then I just like listening to worship music."

Jesus and Work. When asked what practices help to make Jesus present to her, Tanya (RBC 2) replied, "I think my job." She is an administrator and enjoys the work that she does, taking pleasure when her labors enable the organization that employs her to function well and assist colleagues to do their jobs and find satisfaction in them. Miriam (RBC 20) regrets that she thinks so little about God and work. "I wish I remembered to pray, to notice God more at work, but I don't seem to." Henry, on the other hand, sees in work a vital opportunity to know the presence of Jesus and feels that he experiences Jesus most intensely when he commits himself

completely to a project at work, in effect, giving himself away to a cause. He also sees a parallel to the incarnation in the way that he was able to give himself away in a dance performance:

> *Henry (FBCJP 14)*
> *I come home day after day . . . from performances with nothing left. There's no me left, because I've given it all away. And I think that does make Jesus seem actual, because, you know, that is actually what Jesus did. He gave himself away.*

Jesus and the Arts. Tanya (RBC 2) appreciates the performing arts, especially dance, although she is less certain of its value in public worship. Music also features as an important medium for connecting with Jesus. Fiona, the church musician at First Baptist, certainly experiences music as a vital aspect of her spirituality. She is not alone. Daphne, a gifted musician and singer, detects the presence of Jesus alongside her in the actual work of composition:

> *Daphne (FBCJP 5)*
> *I feel when I'm composing at the piano, I feel that Jesus is there with me in joy and celebration. . . . You know when I experience the death of a loved one, I feel comfort or when I am sick or when I visit with people in the hospital I feel that Jesus is present.*

Elizabeth combines a range of practices in the everyday expression of her faith. She appreciates the grandeur of nature, has studied New Testament Greek at a seminary to better understand the Bible, but most tellingly, finds Jesus in the silence that accompanies the art of painting:

> *Elizabeth (FBCJP 13)*
> *I think it is in some ways like a meditation. It's a – you go into a place without words and I think that's when you feel closest. Time passes and you don't know time has passed.*

Painting permits Elizabeth to inhabit a space beyond words and seemingly impervious to time, at least temporarily.

Jesus, Compassion, Caring, and Hospitality. David, as seen earlier in this chapter, changed career to go into a caring profession. For him, Jesus is most present in "The Christian service stuff, the nursing stuff." Interestingly, he wants to go beyond a practical demonstration of love in action to be able to witness to his faith and speak to people about what he believes:

> *David (FBCJP 11)*
> *I'm having a hard time in working at this and hoping to find some training for this – how do I talk to patients about Christianity*.

Liliana, for whom Jesus changed from being primarily a savior figure to being a faithful and compassionate friend, locates Jesus in being obedient to his commands to care for others:

> *(FBCJP 7)*
> *I respond to his [Jesus] commands of caring for one another*.

The practice of kindness also ranks highly in Richard's estimation of how to experience Jesus in daily life:

> *Richard (FBCJP 19)*
> *I consider it a bit of a calling to go everywhere and be open and unifying and I consider Jesus to be my guide in doing that. And, like you said, I refer to Jesus pretty often, at least once a day for help to do that*.

Ann (RBC 13) at Ruggles reported that hosting people in her home makes Jesus seem nearer, "There is a sense of God's partnership. Jesus is with me in that."

The foregoing analysis of practices is revealing and suggests that there is some correlation between the cognitive, volitional, and affective aspects of a conviction. It

is most striking that adherents of evangelical christology engage in practices that are designed to cultivate an individual's relationship with God/Jesus. These practices are pursued mainly (but not completely) as individuals in isolation from others. Ordinary believers operating with an exemplarist christology tend to concentrate their energies on practices that foster community and extend practical care, compassion, and hospitality to others. These trends are not absolute and mutually exclusive of one another, but they do signal primary emphases that are characteristic or typical of particular types of lived christology. Evangelical christology sees Jesus primarily as a universal savior figure that died so that each individual can enter into a relationship with God. The pursuit of spiritual disciplines from an evangelical christological angle is preoccupied with cultivating an individual's relationship with God. The drift of human action is aimed at the vertical dimension of relating to God. Exemplarist christology sees Jesus primarily as an exceptional and unique, moral example somehow indwelt or inspired by God that inspires us to love our fellow human beings in the same way that Jesus loved the people of his generation. Thus, exemplarist christology in practice aims at horizontal relationships among fellow humans.

The domains of embodied practice described in "Living with Jesus" are not oriented primarily to cognitive learning or reflection. They aim at emotion and relationship. Furthermore, embodied practices are the consequence of and give expression to decisions to pursue particular courses of action. In other words, the affective and volitional dimensions of conviction meet in the embodied practices of lived or practical christology. Since embodied practices are chiefly vehicles for the

affective and volitional aspects of convictions it is, perhaps, not totally surprising that the practices of lived christology often appear to do without words and find ways of going beyond them. They are instruments of spirituality that reach out beyond the capacities and limitations of words and ideas. It is almost as though embodied practices silently acknowledge that God and Jesus cannot be fully comprehended by words and mental concepts. They proclaim the limits of doctrinal statement and reflection.

The embodied nature of human existence is a given, the very condition of being human and all human interactions. It is in the context of embodied existence shaped by experience, emotions and relationships that ordinary believers seek to follow Jesus. The complexity of human life supports McClendon's multifaceted analysis of convictions and suggests that practitioners of doctrinal reflection in the academy and those charged with pastoral leadership in the church need to give more attention to the place of emotion and volition in the formation and consolidation of Christian convictions.

The time has now arrived to pull the various threads of "Living with Jesus" together, place the congregational and everyday christologies found at Ruggles Baptist Church and First Baptist Church in Jamaica Plain in dialogue with the christology of James McClendon, and draw some conclusions.

CHAPTER SEVEN

FORWARD IN THE FULLNESS OF CHRIST

We stand in need of an interpretation of salvation which operates within a comprehensive Christological framework, which makes the totus Christus – his incarnation, earthly life, death, resurrection, and parousia – indispensable for church and theology.[1]

Partners in a Conversation

A conversation in the sense of an exchange of words and ideas, by definition, requires two partners to happen. "Living with Jesus" is essentially an exercise in identifying different types of theological discourse (congregational theology, everyday theology, and academic theology), the conversation partners so to speak, and then setting up a dialogue between these different types of theological discourse to generate creative and critical insights useful to church and academy. The task of the present chapter is to pull together the different strands of theological discourse (congregational theology, everyday theology, and academic theology) described by "Living with Jesus" in a critical and constructive manner.

The first step in facilitating a dialogue between the different types of theological discourse presented in the body of this project is to briefly rehearse the main points of James McClendon's christology (academic christology) and similarly the key findings or practical christologies that emerged from the data generated by studying First Baptist

[1] David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 399.

Church in Jamaica Plain and Ruggles Baptist Church.

The Academic Christology of James McClendon

McClendon's account of the person and work of Jesus Christ distils six main points from his examination of scripture and Christian tradition. First, the ministry of Jesus centered on proclaiming the kingdom of God. His earthly work was oriented towards the last things breaking into the present and calling people to embark upon a new way of life as his disciples. Second, McClendon interprets Jesus as the measure of sin or human rebellion towards God. The life of Jesus is the standard against which our lives are to be compared to know what it means to live faithfully before God in trust and obedience. Third, Jesus' death upon the cross is multifaceted in nature. McClendon believes that the cross overcomes the evil that spoils human lives, satisfies God because it is God's own story, and transforms human lives from merely admiring Jesus to actually becoming his disciples and pursuing the path he has set before them. Fourth, the resurrection is pivotal to McClendon's understanding of Jesus. Apart from the resurrection there would be no grounds for remembering Jesus or paying any attention to him. The resurrection is critical for understanding the identity of Jesus and encountering God. It is in the resurrection that God most fully identifies with Jesus. Christians encounter God in the Risen One, Jesus of Nazareth. In McClendon's academic christology, therefore, the resurrection is no optional extra that can be discarded without consequence. Fifth, McClendon explains the presence of God in Jesus by recourse to the convergence of human and divine stories in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus

Christ. McClendon appeals to a narrative explanation of the identity of Jesus and his relation to God. Sixth, Christians encounter the Risen One in the practices of the church. McClendon celebrates the corporate practices of the church as places to meet the Risen One and so rendezvous with God.

Three Types of Christology

In this dissertation three types of practical christology were found to be operative in the corporate worship and mission of the two congregations and the daily lives of ordinary believers: evangelical christology (Jesus saves us from our sins), exemplarist christology (Jesus shows us how to love others), and prophetic christology (Jesus challenges the structures and conventions of society to create an inclusive community, a radical alternative to prevailing social systems and relationships, that works for justice and peace). Table 5 shows the distribution of these ways of understanding Jesus in the two congregations studied.

Table 5. Distribution of Congregational and Everyday Christologies

	First Baptist Church	Ruggles Baptist Church
Congregational Christology	Prophetic Christology	Evangelical Christology
Everyday Christology	Exemplarist Christology	Evangelical Christology
	Evangelical Christology	
	Prophetic Christology	

The three christological questions asked by McClendon and the answers that emerge from each of the practical christologies found across First Baptist and Ruggles are presented in a summary form in Table 6. Question one is essentially about authority. What right does Jesus have to absolute Lordship? Question two is asking for an explanation. How can Christian claims about Jesus be plausible and faithful in the context of a commitment to monotheism? Question three addresses the issue of character. How Christ-like are the followers of Jesus to be? Each practical christology answers the three questions differently with a distinct primary idea.

Table 6. McClendon's Christological Questions - Practical Christological Answers

McClendon's Christological Questions	Evangelical Christology	Exemplarist Christology	Prophetic Christology
What right does Jesus have to absolute Lordship?	Jesus' work on the cross inspires gratitude and his divine identity, revealed in the resurrection, requires total obedience.	The selfless example of Jesus even to the point of death upon the cross shows the nature of how God wants us to love others.	Jesus proclaimed and demonstrated the kingdom of God. Namely, God was at work in Jesus to reveal and initiate the world as it is meant to be.
How can Christians assert that God is uniquely present in the life of Jesus?	The Bible teaches that God is uniquely present in Jesus and the experience of relationship with God through Jesus confirms it.	God is self-evidently present and at work in Jesus, who embodies the Golden Rule in an unparalleled way.	God is self-evidently present and at work in Jesus, proclaiming and demonstrating the kingdom of God.
How Christ-like are Christians to be?	Christians are to aspire to Christ-likeness, which means loving God and loving one's neighbors.	Christians are to aspire to Christ-likeness, which means living out the reciprocal moral principle of the Golden Rule.	Christians are to aspire to Christ-likeness, which means looking out for where the kingdom of God is appearing and working with it to achieve an inclusive community, justice, and peace.

Table 7 compares McClendon's core christological convictions to the core convictions of the three practical christologies identified in "Living with Jesus".

Table 7. McClendon's Christological Convictions - Practical Christological Convictions

McClendon's Christological Convictions	Evangelical Christological Convictions	Exemplarist Christological Convictions	Prophetic Christological Convictions
Jesus proclaimed the kingdom of God.	God seeks relationship with individual human beings and requires a follower of Jesus to love God and love his or her neighbor.	God requires that you love your neighbor as yourself. Love is moral compassion expressed as caring for the needs of others.	The kingdom of God is God's initiative to turn the world upside down and bring about just, peaceful, and inclusive relations between people.
Jesus' saving work on the cross is multi-faceted.	Jesus died as a sacrifice for the forgiveness of sins.	Jesus died as an example of love for others.	Jesus died as the outcome of faithfulness to the kingdom of God.
Jesus' resurrection is decisive for understanding his identity.	The resurrection is bodily and confirms that Jesus is truly divine. It is a doctrine essential to Christian faith.	The idea of a bodily resurrection is problematic for some (but Jesus continues as a spiritual presence) and believed by others.	The resurrection happened, but the details don't matter. It is a sign that God's good purposes for the world will ultimately prevail and a source of hope to work for justice and peace.
Jesus is the one in whom divine and human stories converge.	Jesus is the pre-existent Son of God incarnate: truly human and truly divine. He was conceived of a virgin, fulfils Old Testament prophecy, died to save us, and was raised to new life.	Jesus is God or inspired by God. The presence of God in Jesus is affirmed but is considered a great mystery and hard to fathom.	Jesus is God or inspired by God. The presence of God in Jesus is affirmed but is considered a great mystery and hard to fathom.
Jesus is encountered in the practices of the church.	Jesus is encountered in worship, mission, and daily life. A follower experiences Jesus as a person in a relationship with him or her.	Jesus is encountered in worship, mission, and daily life. A follower experiences Jesus or the spirit of Jesus with him or her and in relating to people he or she cares for.	Jesus is encountered in worship, mission, and daily life. A follower discerns the spirit of Jesus in signs of the kingdom of God breaking in around him or her.

Theological Dialogue

The Teaching of Jesus

James McClendon characterizes the ministry of Jesus in terms of eschatology. The future breaks into the present through his proclamation and demonstration of the kingdom of God (the eschatological rule of God). McClendon concurs with the prevailing opinion in New Testament scholarship that the main burden of Jesus' message and ministry was the eschatological rule of God, a conviction that has dominated the field since Albert Schweitzer popularized the idea in *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*[2] at the outset of the twentieth century.[3] McClendon points to several pictures utilized by Jesus to press home his eschatological theme including the Last Judgment, Jesus Christ Returning, Resurrection, Death, Hell, and Heaven.[4] He acknowledges the disconcerting nature of beginning an exposition of Christian doctrine with the Last Things:

> To insist that Christian faith is eschatological faith is to trouble the sleep of the smug powers *(exousia)* that appear to control the present and also the sleep of the captive theologies that support them. For Christians to believe and teach in contradiction of these self-assured authorities is necessarily dangerous.[5]

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[2] Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of Its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998). A fellow Baptist to McClendon, the British New Testament scholar George Beasley-Murray, furnished a comprehensive survey of Jesus' teaching on the kingdom of God the same year that the first edition of *Ethics* was published. See G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Jesus and the Kingdom of God* (Grand Rapids, MI/Exeter: William Eerdmans Publishing Company/The Paternoster Press, 1986).

[3] Although substantial agreement exists among New Testament scholars and theologians that the kingdom of God is the burden of Jesus' ministry, multiple interpretations of its nature and significance for understanding Jesus are evident in church and academy.

[4] James Wm. McClendon, Jr., *Doctrine: Systematic Theology* vol. 2 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1994), 78-89.

[5] Ibid., 69-70.

To proclaim the true nature of the human condition, society, and culture from God's perspective inevitably courts opposition and hostility from the people, institutions, and vested interests that deny God's purposes in their disposition and action. The eschatological rule of God calls for a radical transformation in the character of human life towards God, in the personal self of each individual, in the complex webs of human relations, and in the social structures that people make. To live in harmony with the kingdom of God is to live life as God intends it to be.

The teaching of Jesus according to evangelical christology emphasizes that God seeks relationship with individuals. God is fundamentally concerned with overcoming the alienation of human beings from the divine life caused by human rebellion (sin) and reclaiming each individual lost soul for eternal fellowship. Jesus' message is, on such a reading of the Gospel, primarily about the salvation of the individual human being and the appropriate response to receiving such a wonderful gift. The follower of Jesus is to love God with his or her whole being and to love one's neighbor as oneself. Evangelical christology is a powerful narrative because it makes clear that God cares for the individual human being and provides a rationale for a life dedicated to loving God, especially through participation in worship, and loving one's neighbor through good works. Evangelical christology preserves a balance grounded in the New Testament witness to Jesus between love for God and love for other people.

Interviewees at Ruggles and First Baptist adhering to an evangelical christology said next to nothing about the kingdom of God.[6] Although the kingdom of God had featured in Larry Showalter's preaching at Ruggles in the past and a series looking at what the kingdom of God means was scheduled for the New Year in 2007, the theme was not reflected in the congregational practices of worship and mission during my period of research and rarely got mentioned in conversation with people in the congregation.[7] McClendon, by putting the spotlight on the kingdom of God, challenges evangelical christology to reckon seriously with this theme as the heartbeat of Jesus' ministry and to do so by setting Jesus in the social, political, economic, and religious context of First Century Palestine, and to move beyond (but not reject) affirmations about Jesus for personal salvation.

Exemplarist christology compresses the teaching of Jesus to the Golden Rule, a moral principle of reciprocal love, thus concentrating human energy on the horizontal dimension of human relations. Two inherent dangers, from McClendon's perspective, follow from confining the content of Jesus' teaching primarily to the Golden Rule. First,

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[6] Nor did any interviewee with an evangelical christology mention what is traditionally known as the Great Commission (Matthew 28:16-20), where the risen Jesus commands his disciples to go into all the world to make disciples. Such an omission is striking given the historic commitment of evangelicalism to the practice of evangelism. See Mark A. Noll, *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada* (London: SPCK, 1992), 163-190, 219-244.

[7] The "kingdom of God" has been interpreted in a variety of ways within evangelical theology. Three in particular stand out. First, the prevailing interpretation for most of the twentieth century was that the kingdom of God describes the present inner rule of God in the believer's heart. Second especially in charismatic circles, the kingdom of God has functioned as a framework to account for signs, wonders, and healing in the practice of evangelism. Third, evangelicals committed to social action have appealed to the kingdom of God as a basis for their theology and practice. See Graham Cray, "The Theology of the Kingdom," *A Paper Prepared for the 'Charismatic and Evangelical Social Activism Consultation' Pasadena, 12-15 January 1988*.

although showing moral compassion for the needs of others is in accordance with God's will and so pleasing to the divine purpose, God is squeezed out of the narrative. A narrowing of what it means to be human is implicit when God ceases to be the primary concern of human life. For McClendon, God needs to be kept in view so that we can be truly human. Second, in practice an exemplarist christological conception of Jesus tends to find expression in Golden Rule Christianity. The imperative to demonstrate compassion and care for people in one's life is by necessity self-limiting. Golden Rule Christianity can be insular and averse to mission, tendencies that sit uncomfortably with McClendon's portrait of Jesus proclaiming Good News to his generation, including people excluded from the mainstream of society, and the priority attached to mission throughout *Systematic Theology*. McClendon's christology challenges the exemplarist vision of what it means to follow Jesus and broadens it to include an outward looking perspective. The Gospel of the kingdom of God and the one who proclaims it are Good News for all people everywhere.

The prophetic christology communicated in the preaching of Ashlee Wiest-Laird and teaching of Lance Laird recognizes the centrality of the kingdom of God to the teaching and ministry of Jesus. Fragments of the kingdom of God are present or in the process of being absorbed in the everyday christologies of people at First Baptist, but overall the emphasis upon the kingdom of God is most evident in the everyday christologies of the Lairds and the corporate practices of worship, mission, and Adult Christian Education, which they play a big part in shaping. A gap exists, although it is closing, between the prevailing congregational christology (prophetic christology) and

the most common everyday christologies (exemplarist christology and evangelical christology) evident at First Baptist. Patterns of change and hybridity are present in the everyday christologies at First Baptist, which lends support to McClendon's claim that convictions can and do change. However, the progress of change in christological convictions (cognitive, volitional, and affective) in the everyday life of a follower of Jesus is not necessarily linear, systematic, and comprehensive. Change in christological convictions is more likely to be uneven and haphazard. In fact, ordinary believers possess a remarkable capacity to hold, simultaneously, paradoxical positions and fragments, such as different versions of the Jesus story. This makes the tasks of description and interpretation difficult for the social scientist and theologian, but such is the reality of human existence.

The change and hybridity observed at First Baptist is happening in the context of people switching between denominations (for example, from the Southern Baptist Convention and Roman Catholic Church to American Baptist Churches USA) and, in the process, switching between stories of Jesus or adapting one version of the Jesus story to incorporate elements from another. Many interviewees at Ruggles, in contrast, acquired a robust evangelical christology in large part because they were intentionally taught and socialized into an evangelical framework in the context of evangelical student ministries that were reinforced in a variety of other church-related settings. Ruggles manifests a relatively uniform culture, First Baptist a more open and mixed culture. Even though the preaching and teaching input to the congregation at First Baptist consistently communicates a prophetic christology, other strands of christology are present in the

liturgy, especially in the selection of hymns (traditional and contemporary) sung by the congregation. These songs celebrate the unity and inclusive character of the Christian church, declare traditional notions of the cross, and confess the resurrection and continuing presence of Jesus. At First Baptist Sunday worship and the Adult Christian Education class function as social forums to promote an alternative version of the Jesus story to the evangelical and exemplarist models current in the everyday christologies within the congregation. People are being invited to consider the place of the kingdom of God in the life and ministry of Jesus and to ask what it means for Christian discipleship today. Teaching on the kingdom of God at First Baptist makes clear that to follow Jesus and to work in cooperation with the kingdom of God risks inviting opposition, adversity, suffering, and even death into the experience of an individual Christian and a congregation. McClendon and the New Testament share such an outlook. The follower of Jesus must be prepared to pick up his or her cross and tread the same kind of path that he did.

Jesus' focus on the kingdom of God, as borne out by the New Testament witness to Jesus and highlighted by McClendon, challenges the silence of evangelical and exemplarist christologies on the theme of the kingdom of God and the cost of Christian discipleship.

The Death of Jesus

A key assumption in *Systematic Theology* is that the three historic models of the cross examined by McClendon were culturally relevant interpretations of the work of

Jesus appropriate to the times and places in which they were developed, but they no longer resonate with the contemporary cultural landscape in the West. McClendon also assumes that Western culture at the end of the twentieth century is undergoing a significant transition from a modern to postmodern condition. Two consequences follow for McClendon in relation to the Christian understanding of atonement. First, the church needs to take a fresh look at the Scriptural witness to the Passion of Jesus to construct an understanding of atonement informed by the Bible rather than outmoded theories developed in the centuries that followed the life of Jesus and the beginnings of the early church. In particular, McClendon suspects that the Biblical image of sacrifice is a theme full of potential for Christian theology as the church enters the twenty-first century. Second, any re-worked understanding of the cross must be intelligible to the new culture emerging. McClendon here aspires to combine fidelity to the Christian tradition (for McClendon the Great Story of God in the Bible) and plausibility (what is intelligible and credible in the contemporary cultural context). At this juncture he seems rather closer to evangelical concerns for apologetics (providing good reasons to take Christian claims about God seriously) and liberal emphases on integrating Christian faith with contemporary worldviews.

McClendon's assumption that the West is transitioning to a postmodern condition is not without problems. Sociologists of religion are much more circumspect about describing contemporary Western culture and society as postmodern. Duncan MacLaren thinks there is plenty of evidence that pre-modern, modern, and postmodern modes of culture are present in the contemporary world. "Put differently, religion is not confined

to the clichéd 'postmodern pic 'n' mix global supermarket of faiths', but may be found, say, in the form of modern imperial Catholicism, or pre-modern Islamic theocracy."[8] James Beckford observes that the methods utilized to promote so-called "postmodern culture" are prime examples of the "application of science and instrumental rationality".[9] If it is the case that pre-modern, modern, and postmodern currents of thought are present and intermingling in Western culture, then the data reported in "Living with Jesus" make sense. Historic models of the atonement like the satisfaction theory (Jesus' death did something objective to save human beings from the wrath and judgment of God) and the moral influence theory (Jesus' death inspires change within the human heart) continue to shape practical christologies in congregational worship and mission and everyday lives. Yet, it is also evident that some ordinary believers struggle with traditional explanations of the cross and claims about the absolute uniqueness of Jesus. Consequently, the atonement and the person of Jesus are subject to revision and rethinking.

People with evangelical christologies constitute the largest group of interviewees. They view the death of Jesus as a sacrifice for the forgiveness of sins. His death somehow pays a debt incurred by human beings to release them from the power and penalty of sin. The second prominent group of interviewees (all present at First Baptist) adhere to an exemplarist christology of one sort or another and question any notion of the

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[8] Duncan MacLaren, *Mission Implausible: Restoring Credibility to the Church* (Bletchley, Milton Keynes: Paternoster Press, 2004), ix.

[9] James A. Beckford, *Social Theory and Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 201-202.

cross as a sacrifice that pays some kind of debt for sin, but they simultaneously embrace the image of sacrifice as an example of love that inspires disciples of Jesus to imitate his example and so confess a moral influence theory of the cross. The two dominant theories of atonement at First Baptist and Ruggles are both well-established historic traditions of interpretation of the cross. Intriguingly the data shows that the metaphor of sacrifice is very prominent in both streams of thought about the cross. McClendon himself proposes the metaphor of sacrifice as a potential trajectory for interpretation of the cross to pursue in the future.[10]

Systematic Theology interprets the death of Jesus as a complex event that has meaning in relation to evil, humanity, and God. McClendon's multifaceted perspective on the cross poses a challenge to each of the three types of lived christology depicted in "Living with Jesus". In stark contrast to McClendon's multi-layered conception of the cross, each of the three types of lived christology apparent in the data prunes the meaning of the cross down to one primary idea: Jesus died as a sacrifice for the forgiveness of sins (evangelical christology), Jesus died as an example of love for others (exemplarist christology), and Jesus died as the outcome of faithfulness to the kingdom of God (prophetic christology). Although more than one perspective on the cross can be present in the corporate practices of a congregation and the practical christology of an ordinary

[10] McClendon was strikingly prescient in recognizing that "sacrifice" would increasingly attract attention as a theme in Christian theology. See McClendon, *Doctrine*, 232. Contemporary theologians both challenge and seek to rehabilitate the image of sacrifice in Christian theology. Mark Heim, for example, finds the image of sacrifice problematic owing to its associations with violence, but Sarah Coakley sees constructive potential in it as a way of talking about self-giving love. See S. Mark Heim, *Saved from Sacrifice: A Theology of the Cross* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2006) and Sarah Coakley, "Evolution and Sacrifice: Cooperation as a Scientific Principle," *Christian Century* 126, no. 21 (2009): 10-11.

believer, in actuality one idea tends to be dominant. For example, evangelical christology sees the cross primarily as a sacrifice for sins. It can also interpret the cross as an example of love modeled by Jesus, but the controlling interpretation of the cross remains that Jesus died as part of God's plan to save humankind from sin.

What accounts for focusing the definition of the cross to a singular meaning in each instance? First, when each christological perspective defines the cross in terms of one primary idea, advocates of each version of the Jesus story are assisted in the task of communicating the message clearly and simply. Second, each understanding of the cross carries with it a corresponding volitional content (decision). Confining atonement theory to one big idea assists in clarifying what the follower of Jesus is expected to do. Evangelical christology requires an individual to decide to accept Jesus as Lord and Savior and continue as a faithful disciple committed to the worship of God and good works. Exemplarist christology compels the Christian disciple to demonstrate love or moral compassion in practical action that cares for people. Prophetic christology expects followers of Jesus to discern where God is at work in movements for justice and peace in church and society. Third, the affective dimension of each type of christology is located in how ordinary believers make emotional sense of the cross. Evangelical christology generates a sense of gratitude based on what Jesus has done for the believer through his death, exemplarist christology evokes a sense of heartfelt compassion for people in need, and prophetic christology thrives on a burning desire to see justice and peace prevail in human society. In summary, reducing the meaning of the cross to one big idea results in

cognitive precision (what I believe to be true about the cross and Jesus), volitional clarity (what I must choose to do), and emotional power (what I experience).

Baptists of all persuasions agree that Jesus cannot be ignored. He compels decision. A Baptist is always going to ask, "So what do you think about Jesus?" Of course the response sought depends a great deal on who any given Baptist presenting the Christian story thinks Jesus is. The data generated for "Living with Jesus" suggest that the cross is at the heart of defining the identity of Jesus for the ordinary believers at First Baptist Church in Jamaica Plain and Ruggles Baptist Church. Ultimately, the meaning assigned to the cross (cognitive dimension of the conviction) will influence the nature of the decision required (volitional dimension of the conviction)) and elicit particular feelings or emotions (affective dimension of the conviction).

Prophetic christology contends that Jesus lost his life as a direct consequence of faithfulness to the kingdom of God, a position that is entirely consistent with McClendon's reading of the New Testament.[11] Yet, such an interpretation of the cross does not tell the full story. McClendon views the various theories of the atonement devised in the history of the church as similar to Jewish Midrashim or culturally relevant interpretations of Scripture appropriate to a specific time and place. Each theory of atonement addresses certain primary questions, but the very multiplicity of perspectives illustrates the depth and richness of the meaning of the cross. McClendon sees three primary "vectors" in the cross: devilward (evil), Godward, and humanward. His christology in so far as it relates the work of Jesus on the cross invites each version of the

[11] McClendon, *Doctrine*, 236.

Jesus story embedded in congregational practices and everyday lives to broaden its horizons and acknowledge that there is more to the cross of Jesus. No one theory is adequate to the cross.

These three different positions are not logically incompatible with each other, but each is held passionately as *the* interpretation (or at least the best interpretation) of the cross. The cognitive component of the conviction about the cross is reinforced affectively. Sometimes, as reflected in the data, a commitment to one type of soteriology is accentuated, because an ordinary believer has dispensed with another type of soteriology that is no longer credible to him or her and possibly even objectionable. In each case, the ordinary believer expresses an understanding of the cross that is the consequence of reading the Jesus story in the New Testament through a distinct hermeneutic lens. These conceptual frameworks are not merely abstract in nature. Emotion plays a very significant role in the appropriation, consolidation, modification, or rejection of a conviction in the life story of a believer. For example, it is possible to see how evangelical christology's notion of the cross as a sacrifice for the forgiveness of sins (cognitive dimension of a conviction), and the decision to trust and obey Jesus as Savior and Lord (volitional dimension of a conviction), acquire real persuasive power when an ordinary believer experiences a sense of forgiveness, acceptance, peace, joy, and purpose (affective dimension of a conviction). Such emotional outcomes are attributed to the work of Jesus upon the cross and appropriation by faith of the grace of God. An exemplarist perspective effectively assumes that God can forgive without the cross of Jesus. Construed as a profound example of love (cognitive dimension of a conviction)

the consequent decision required of the follower is to imitate Jesus (volitional dimension of a conviction) and the emotion aroused is predominantly one of compassion for those in need (affective dimension of a conviction).

When a person transitions from one christology (for example, an evangelical christology) to a different one (for example, a prophetic christology) the easiest way of detecting this is at the cognitive and volitional levels of conviction. We tend to put what we believe and the decisions that we make into words. Thus, Jesus is no longer viewed primarily as a universal savior figure, but, rather, he is now seen as a prophetic figure that announces the kingdom of God. Volitionally, the choice is not principally about believing in Jesus for the forgiveness of sins, but deciding to work with manifestations of the kingdom of God. However, the affective element of a conviction, which is often wrapped up in aesthetic preferences (for example particular patterns of worship, styles of music, and congregational ethos), cultural attachments (a Southern Baptist way of being church where programs operate for a full calendar year or an American Baptist Church in New England that suspends programs for the summer months), and habits of the heart (what matters to a person deep down) are not easily renegotiated. It is conceivable that the cognitive and volitional aspects of a practical christology are malleable in a way that the affective dimension of a conviction is not. The possibility also exists that the affective dimension of a conviction makes it hard to embrace a new cognitive perspective and the volitional implications that follow.

The Resurrection of Jesus

McClendon is adamant that the resurrection of Jesus from the dead is vital to making sense of his identity and encountering God. Although, McClendon eschews apologetics (making a reasoned case for the veracity of Christian truth claims) in *Systematic Theology*, he acknowledges in passing that apologetics has a part to play in Christian mission. However, he appeals principally to the testimony of the New Testament and Christian experience through the centuries. McClendon is energized in his personal faith by the conviction that he has encountered the Risen One in his own life experience. The encounter he writes about in *Systematic Theology* transforms lives. McClendon writes unambiguously and boldly about the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. Indeed, encountering the Risen One is fundamental to *Systematic Theology*.

His confidence that Jesus was raised from the dead contrasts with the hesitation and uncertainty manifested in approximately half of the exemplarist christologies at First Baptist. These interviewees were perplexed by the resurrection, but, equally, professed a belief in the continuing presence of Jesus, a kind of spirit christology. At the extreme end of the spectrum, David, as noted in Chapter Six, thought that the Jesus story was complete without the resurrection. The latter was not necessary. Jesus' life, teaching, and death upon the cross demonstrate how we are to love as human beings. Strictly speaking nothing more is needed. Yet, David still sees Jesus as a continuing presence in his everyday life and prays to him. McClendon insists that the resurrection functions as a kind of window on the future. God raising Jesus from the dead shows us that his love ultimately prevails over death, evil, and sin. It is difficult, from McClendon's

perspective, to see any basis for hope in the Jesus story if the resurrection is cut out. The perplexity surrounding the resurrection conceived as an historical event evident in several interviews suggests a tension between fidelity to the tradition, which confesses God raised Jesus from the dead, and plausibility defined in terms of what a rational, scientific world view, deems possible. Several interviewees clearly struggle with the notion of a dead person rising from the grave as the outcome of a personal God intervening in the affairs of the human race.

About half of the exemplarist christological interviewees at First Baptist assert a literal understanding of the New Testament accounts of the resurrection from the dead. Several ordinary believers that hold an exemplarist christology (notably among the lifelong members of the church) affirm the resurrection as an article of faith. They know that the teaching on the resurrection is part of the tradition and to be believed. However, they make a distinction between truth to be received on rational grounds because it is self-evident or can be demonstrated beyond reasonable doubt or as the most probable explanation and articles of faith to be received as something akin to a leap in the dark. Although Jesus' resurrection from the dead seems less than certain to this group of believers, they are persuaded (or at least hope) that life beyond death awaits human beings. McClendon's insistence that God raised Jesus from the dead challenges the ambiguity and caution found among some interviewees with exemplarist christological convictions at First Baptist. Historically, the resurrection of Jesus has been the basis for Christian hope. The Apostle Paul is blunt. If Jesus Christ has not been raised from the

dead, then Christian life is a waste of time and the messengers of the Gospel story are false (1 Corinthians 15:12-19). None of the interviewees raised this objection.

Prophetic christology affirms the resurrection as a cardinal Christian belief, but avoids defining exactly what it means. The resurrection of Jesus remains open to multiple interpretations with no one explanation regarded as definitive. Prophetic christology demonstrates a postmodern tendency to see many different truths in the Christian proclamation that Jesus is risen from the dead. The preaching and teaching at First Baptist appeals to the resurrection as the basis for hope to inspire and sustain followers of Jesus in working for justice and peace in a world that is indifferent and, at times, hostile to such endeavors. In the context of First Baptist, where a congregation is seeking a new lease on life, seeking to reverse numerical decline and recover from the devastating setback of a fire, the resurrection and the risen Jesus constitute a vital basis for hope. The prophetic christology articulated by Ashlee Wiest-Laird and Lance Laird recognizes that a congregation can hardly be inspired to press on in the journey of faith together or as individuals in the face of adversity, if there is no foundation for hope.

Empirical data in the form of practical christologies challenge the academic christology of James McClendon. For example, some of the practical christologies on display in "Living with Jesus" hesitate to affirm the resurrection of Jesus or, at least, are perplexed by this core Christian teaching and struggle to make sense of it. Such practical christologies stand in tension with James McClendon's academic christology that insists upon the centrality of the resurrection for understanding Jesus and Christianity. Are such ordinary believers to be regarded as less than Christian? What is going on when an

ordinary believer is uncertain what to say or believe about the resurrection of Jesus but simultaneously affirms the risen presence of Jesus, and then stands up to sing hymns that proclaim the resurrection of Jesus from the dead? Such a position cannot be reconciled completely with McClendon's academic christology, which affirms both the resurrection of Jesus and his risen presence in the life of the ordinary believer and the corporate life and witness of the Christian community.

However, the practical christologies that are perplexed by the resurrection of Jesus from the dead can be understood from two theoretical perspectives beyond the scope of McClendon's academic christology. First, such practical christologies can be interpreted within the framework of *apophatic* or negative theology. Negative theology stresses that human words and concepts break down in the face of God's transcendence. The *apophatic* tradition, in its modest expressions, acknowledges that it is possible to speak appropriately about God as a consequence of revelation, but we cannot fully express God in human language or totally comprehend God with the human mind. The reticence to speak about the resurrection of Jesus on the part of ordinary believers holding exemplarist christologies, except in terms of doubt or mystery, echoes the *apophatic* tradition in theology that is reticent to speak about God. For such practical christologies the Christian conviction of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead constitutes a threshold beyond which the human mind cannot penetrate. In effect, the resurrection is a mystery of God that commands silence and defeats human attempts at understanding it, even if the continuing presence of Jesus Christ is affirmed.

Second, an element of vicarious religion may be present in some of the practical christologies examined in this project. Several interviewees recognize that the doctrine of the resurrection is part of the inherited deposit of the Faith, a teaching central to Christianity that clearly is supposed to be believed by individual Christians and is sincerely adhered to by many Christians. Could it be that followers of Jesus perplexed by the resurrection of Jesus from the dead and reticent to affirm it lean upon the faith of fellow Christians that do believe God raised Jesus from the dead? These same perplexed ordinary believers affirm the presence of Jesus with them in their lives and so are in agreement with an aspect of Christian doctrine that traditionally follows on from the conviction that God raised Jesus from the dead. Perhaps, in the hearts and minds of ordinary believers puzzled by the resurrection it is the faith of fellow believers that bridges the gap in their practical christologies between the death of Jesus on the cross in the past and the risen presence of Jesus with them here and now. In effect, he or she says, "It's okay to sing about the resurrection, even if I personally wrestle with it in my inmost self, because others do believe it and so uphold this core conviction of Christianity, while we all continue to seek to live by the Jesus story. I depend upon the convictions of others to sustain me at this point in my faith as a follower of Jesus Christ. Others do for me what I cannot do for myself." If, indeed, such thinking is present in a practical christology it is an example of vicarious religion within a community of faith; church leaders and a group of church members believe on behalf of fellow members.[12]

[12] Grace Davie has theorized on the nature of vicarious religion, principally in terms of churchgoers believing on behalf of the non-churchgoing members of a society. "Living with Jesus" adapts

The Identity of Jesus

McClendon dispenses with ancient formulations of the person and work of Jesus, and instead offers an alternative framework for understanding the identity of Jesus and his relation to God. Jesus is unique because divine and human narratives converge in his life, death, and resurrection. The intertwining and identification of divine and human narratives reaches a climax in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead according to McClendon. This is McClendon's solution to the third question he believes resurfaces repeatedly in Christian history: how can monotheists tell the Jesus story?

Evangelical christology answers McClendon's third christological question by affirming that the Bible teaches that Jesus is God, acknowledging the historic ecumenical creeds of Nicaea and Chalcedon, and appealing to personal experience of encountering God in the risen Jesus. At times the distinction between God (the Father) and Jesus (the Son) is not clear. The blurring or confusion of identity is reflected in the "You Lord" songs that do not make clear which person in the Godhead is being addressed in the context of congregational theology and in the testimony of ordinary believers who see Jesus and God as one entity and so use God/Jesus interchangeably. Evangelical christology does not go beyond doctrinal affirmation to consider the logical, ontological, and metaphysical implications of claiming that God is uniquely present in Jesus Christ. Claims about the person of Jesus (truly human and truly divine) and the Triune nature of God are received on trust as part of the Christian message. An evangelical christology

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this insight and applies it to the dynamics operative within a local community of faith. See Grace Davie, "Vicarious Religion: A Methodological Challenge," in *Everyday Religion: Observing Modern Religious Lives*, ed. Nancy T. Ammerman (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 21-35.

acknowledges that Jesus of Nazareth is the pre-existent Son of God, the second person of the Trinity, incarnate in a human life. Hence, by implication, the personal center of Jesus is eternal. Hence, evangelical christology retains a commitment to historic two-nature christology (Jesus is truly human and truly divine) even if adherents don't necessarily understand the meaning of the language and the concepts that lie behind classic doctrinal definitions of the person of Jesus Christ. In retaining, at least a formal commitment to two-nature christology, evangelical christology clearly differs from McClendon, who limits the pre-existence of Jesus as Son of God to an eternal intention on the part of God to bring the two stories, divine and human, together in the life of Jesus of Nazareth. Evangelical christology continues to articulate an ontological conception of Jesus, where McClendon commends a narrative approach. McClendon may wish to change the terms of debate, but the interviews, especially at Ruggles, clearly indicate that people curious about Jesus and Christianity continue to pose ontological and metaphysical questions, which they want Christians to take seriously.

The exemplarist christologies at First Baptist recognize that in some sense God was present and at work in Jesus. For some, Jesus is God or at the very least, God was and is somehow in Jesus. The life of Jesus is taken self-evidently to demonstrate the true nature of love. What is really striking is that about half of the members at First Baptist who hold exemplarist christologies simultaneously express caution about the resurrections as a "physical" or bodily event and reflect an equally strong sense that Jesus is present today. If a follower of Jesus struggles to accept the Christian teaching of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, what is his of her foundation for hope? Two factors

stand out from the data. First, it is evident that exemplarist christoloiges believe in a God of love that cares for creation and human beings. Second, exemplarist christologies appeal to the continuing presence of Jesus as a reminder that life beyond death is real and they are not alone. A conviction about the nature of God (God is love) and an appeal to personal experience (a perception of the continuing presence of Jesus) serve as the basis for hope in the life of a Christian adhering to an exemplarist christology perplexed by the bodily resurrection of Jesus from the dead.

No interviewee with an exemplarist christology talked about pre-existence in relation to Jesus. The exemplarist understanding of the cross does not require a divine savior to effect the forgiveness of sins. Exemplarist christology regards Jesus as the definitive example of what it means to be human exhibiting self-sacrifice, moral compassion for others, and a willingness to die for his principles. Yet, Jesus is no ordinary example. He is somehow still an empowering presence in the world today. Although, somebody like Gandhi may be said to manifest a Christ-like spirit and be admired, he is not identified with Jesus. Ordinary believers with an exemplarist christology don't talk about Gandhi's spirit being with them. Jesus is not simply one example among many. It is Jesus they pray to, seek guidance from, and turn to for strength to live and care for others. An exemplarist christology detects the presence of God in Jesus and identifies a unique significance to him. He occupies a central and defining place in the thinking and experience of ordinary believers with an exemplarist christology. They may struggle to get to grips with the content of doctrinal teaching, but they recognize the mystery of the divine in Jesus.

Prophetic christology reads the Jesus story in its social and political context, accentuates the eschatological theme of the kingdom of God breaking in with Jesus, and sees the kingdom of God at work in the world today. The notion of Jesus as an empowering presence alongside his followers and operative in movements for change characterized by justice and peace is more pronounced than in exemplarist christology. Jesus is perceived to be at work in process for change in human life. Chapter Five noted how important the theme of the resurrection and the presence of the risen Jesus (albeit undefined and open to multiple interpretations) is a crucial theme in the preaching and hymnody at First Baptist. Jesus as a risen presence, whether as a person or active principle, is a source of power and hope. The congregational christology at First Baptist claims the presence of Jesus to make contemporary change possible. God is acknowledged to be present and at work in Jesus. Prophetic christology is not interested much in abstract teachings about Jesus. A historical reading of the Jesus story against the social, political, economic, and religious context of First Century Palestine guides it.

Enchantment, Disenchantment, and Re-Enchantment[13]

The interviews conducted for "Living with Jesus" demonstrate that convictions about Jesus Christ are not necessarily static. A person's convictions about Jesus Christ can morph with the passage of time. Such findings are to be expected, because

[13] The heading is borrowed from Dave Tomlinson who is seeking a contemporary expression of the faith that is both faithful to the Christian tradition and plausible in the context of twenty-first century western culture. See Dave Tomlinson, *Re-Enchanting Christianity: Faith in an Emerging Culture* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2008).

Christianity is intrinsically a missionary movement. Historically, Christianity started in Palestine, subsequently expanded into the Roman Empire circumscribing the Mediterranean world, and eventually moved beyond the borders of Imperial Rome. Christianity spread because it possessed the capacity to cross cultural boundaries and attracted people to change their religious identity and convert to following Jesus Christ. Today, Christianity continues to attract people to change religious identities in the United States and is still spreading globally, especially in the southern hemisphere. The New Testament also assumes that Christians possess a potential in the community of the church and with the help of the Holy Spirit to grow in maturity and so anticipates a transition of sorts within faith. The three practical christologies distilled from research data in "Living with Jesus" are not construed as different levels of Christian maturity, but represent different ways of understanding and working out the Christian life. They illustrate the simultaneous presence of multiple stories about who Jesus is within Christian communities of faith.

One source of that diversity is the prevalence of "switching" among U.S. Christians. What factors contribute to a climate in which religious switching is possible? In the United States today, studies and surveys of religion repeatedly show that individual Americans are willing to switch their religious allegiance, especially within the parameters of a broad religious tradition such as Christianity, by moving from one denomination to another.[14] The phenomenon of switching religious affiliation fits in with

[14] See, for example, The Pew Forum U.S. Religious Landscape Survey 2008. Data can be reviewed at: http://religions.pewforum.org/reports.

basic assumptions in American society, namely, freedom of religion in a religiously plural context and the principle of choice in a consumer culture. However, what religion means[15] and what constitutes conversion are not always easy to define and can vary according to time and place.[16] For example, switching from a Roman Catholic affiliation to a Protestant affiliation would have been regarded as a kind of conversion in the past that entailed rejecting a set of beliefs, a community of faith, and even family ties. Today the same kind of stigma no longer applies so rigidly, although variation in the intensity of approval and rejection that an individual can experience in switching religion does exist. Indeed, for some, choosing a religious identity remains a significant decision with potentially far reaching consequences.

The demise of doctrine in American Christianity, notably in Protestant Christianity,[17] partially helps to account for the relative ease of moving between different streams of Christian tradition. Alan Wolfe comments, "Americans prefer practical, commonsensical, and even materialistic concepts of religion to those driven by doctrinal

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[15] Nancy T. Ammerman, "The Challenges of Pluralism: Locating religion in a World of Diversity," *Social Compass* 57, no. 2 (2010): 154-167. The complexity of what counts as religious makes describing and analyzing religion a challenging task.

[16] Conversion is not simply an interior experience within an individual, but also includes socially constructed elements. See Gordon Lynch, "Beyond Conversion: Exploring the Process of Moving Away from Evangelical Christianity," in *Finding and Losing Faith: Studies in Conversion*, ed. Christopher Partridge and Helen Reid (Bletchley, Milton Keynes: Paternoster Press, 2006), 23-28.

[17] Alan Wolfe, *The Transformation of American Religion: How We Actually Live Our Faith* (New York: Free Press, 2003), 67-95.

or theological considerations."[18] Adherents of different Christian denominations, and sometimes adherents of different religions choose to stress what they have in common rather than accentuate points of disagreement. Four members at First Baptist illustrate this point. Three are married to Christians actively involved in other denominations -- Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and Presbyterian -- and the fourth member is married to a Muslim. Agreement is sought, as far as possible, on the basis of what is shared in common, but differences in doctrine are put on one side for the sake of the very practical task of getting along with one another in the messy business of life.

Two kinds of transition stand out from the data. The first can be described as a transition from unbelief to belief. So, for example, an adherent of a religious tradition other than Christianity or an atheist or an agnostic becomes a Christian and adopts a new set of perspectives on Jesus Christ. In this scenario a person's convictions about Jesus change in the process of conversion to Christianity. Converting to Christianity from outside of the Faith or turning to Christ from within the orbit of the Christian community can be likened to a kind of enchanting or coming alive to faith. This may occur when an international student unfamiliar with Christianity because of his or her cultural background becomes a Christian, or when someone who has grown up within the life of church appropriates a personal faith, choosing to follow Jesus Christ.

The second type of transition can be described as a transition within faith, when the convictions of an ordinary believer alter in the course of his or her on-going Christian discipleship. For example, the convictions about Jesus that an ordinary believer first

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[18] Wolfe, *Transformation of American Religion*, 95.

learned, perhaps as a child from Christian parents or as a student in the early years of adulthood inquiring about Christianity at college, no longer correspond with who Jesus is for him or her today. Such a process of transition within Christianity can be difficult. Change in the form and content of faith within the borders of Christianity for some can be likened to a process of disenchanting (Christianity increasingly lacks plausibility and authenticity) and then re-enchanting (an alternative expression of Christianity is embraced that seems cognitively plausible and personally energizing).[19] These terms summarize the idea of moving beyond one version of Christianity and adopting an alternative type of Christianity. Several contemporary Christian thinkers and church leaders are attempting to construct interpretations of Christianity faithful to its historical sources and plausible in the light of experience and knowledge acquired elsewhere.[20] Their efforts reflect a trajectory that moves from disenchantment to re-enchantment. The process of disenchantment and re-enchantment does not need to be in a direction that questions and dispenses with traditional features of Christian faith.[21] The evidence presented in "Living with Jesus" suggests that a person can transition from one type of

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[19] Marcus J. Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time: The Historical Jesus & The Heart of Contemporary Faith* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1995).

[20] See Brian D. McLaren, *A New Kind of Christianity: Ten Questions that are Transforming the Faith* (HarperOne: New York, 2010); Dave Tomlinson, *Re-Enchanting Christianity: Faith in an Emerging Culture* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2008); Wesley J. Wildman and Stephen Chapin Garner, *Found in the Middle1 Theology and Ethics for Christians Who Are Both Liberal and Evangelical* (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2009).

[21] P. T. Forsyth, an English Congregationalist theologian and Karl Barth, the renowned Swiss theologian, both made journeys from liberal theological positions to more traditional outlooks on Christian doctrine.

christology to a different type or, indeed, move to a place that encompasses hybrid christological perspectives. In some instances, people change the cognitive and volitional components of what they believe about Jesus Christ, but stay fixed on the affective component of a particular christology. The affective component is likely to be associated with aesthetic preferences or tastes, such as music, memories, and relationships.

The interviews conducted to inform this dissertation suggest that a season of transition in one's christological convictions is frequently accompanied by internal cognitive tension and tentativeness of belief. Adverse experiences, intellectual challenges, positive examples of authentic Christian discipleship, or religious individuals and communities failing to live out what they claim to believe are all capable of precipitating a transition from one type of christology to another or expanding the range of christological convictions embraced by an individual or community.

James McClendon has shown in *Biography as Theology*[22] that the convictions held by an individual may be different to those officially confessed by the community of faith to which he or she belongs and so constitute a potential source of tension. In such a context, an individual Christian may act as a prophetic witness and challenge a congregation to live out its profession of faith more consistently and authentically or, as the interview data at First Baptist shows, individuals can begin to adapt everyday christologies or feel anxious because a congregational christology provokes troubling

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[22] James Wm. McClendon, Jr., *Biography as Theology: How Life Stories Can Remake Today's Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1974; reprint, Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2002).

questions or fails to address issues arising from the everyday christology held by an ordinary believer.

Transition to Faith: A Difficult Journey

Finding faith, for many people at Ruggles was a difficult journey in the course of which they wrestled long and hard with questions about God, Jesus Christ, and Christianity. Clearing up misconceptions about Jesus Christ and Christianity is an important element in preparing the ground for faith. Encountering Christians prepared to take questions seriously is a vital part of the journey to faith for many people. Equally important was seeing evidence of genuine Christian faith at work in the lives of followers of Jesus addressing questions about life, God, and what it means to be a Christian. These inquirers did not simply seek satisfying answers to profound questions, but they also observed lives to learn if the beliefs professed by self-identified Christians made any tangible difference to the kind of people they are and what they do. A plausible apologetic is not sufficient. Transformed lives are required to authenticate the claims being made on behalf of Jesus Christ.

However, the fact that a lot of people had wrestled with the claims of Christianity as part of their journey to faith in Jesus Christ does not preclude curiosity and questions subsequently. The main questions raised by people at Ruggles related to living as faithful disciples. What does it mean to follow Jesus in today's world? How is the example and teaching of Jesus to be applied to contemporary life? A few of the interviewees at Ruggles were wrestling with questions about the evangelical framework they had been

taught. Curiosity about the person and work of Jesus was not absent at Ruggles, but it did not feature so prominently compared to First Baptist. Not surprisingly, evangelical christology was unanimously present in the interviewees drawn from Ruggles, which is typical of the student ministries, such as Campus Crusade for Christ and Inter-Varsity Fellowship, that played such an important role in leading many in the congregation to faith in Jesus Christ.

Transitions and Hybrid Christology

The everyday christologies at First Baptist are frequently characterized by transition and hybridity. Convictions about Jesus often seemed to be in a process of change and flux, which resulted in tentative beliefs (notably about the resurrection) or amalgamations of different christological perspectives (doubting that Jesus died for the forgiveness of sins but asserting God raised Jesus bodily from the dead). These characteristics are illustrated in two distinct groups of cradle Baptists present in the congregation at First Baptist. First, the core of elderly members born and raised at First Baptist with a lifetime affiliation with the American Baptist Churches (USA), grew up within a church environment that stressed the importance of placing one's faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, notions that were largely accepted without much questioning and embodied in baptism. These members greatly value belonging to the church community and were responsible for calling Ashlee Wiest-Laird to the pastorate at First Baptist with a mandate to revitalize the church and re-connect it with the local community. Wiest-Laird's ministry is challenging them to enlarge their evangelical and

exemplarist understandings of Jesus, to embrace a prophetic christology and the implications of living for the kingdom of God as Jesus did.

A second group of Baptists consisted of young adults (some with young families) drawn from Southern Baptist roots. The pastor and her husband fall into this category, but there were others. For this group of Baptists, the transition is one of moving beyond an evangelical or fundamentalist expression of Christian faith. These people grew up or were initiated into Christianity in an environment that echoed the evangelical understanding of Christian faith found among ordinary believers at Ruggles. Factors critical to prompting a move beyond evangelical faith included experience of cultural plurality and disillusion with evangelical/fundamentalist expressions of Christianity. Lance Laird illustrates such a transition as a Christian with Southern Baptist roots whose understanding of Christianity has been challenged by dissatisfaction with developments in the Southern Baptist Convention and thought-provoking encounters with Muslims.[23] Such experiences in the lives of believers can precipitate cognitive dissonance and emotional stress as they seek to make sense of Jesus in relation to their personal experience and knowledge accrued in other domains of life.

The character of the developing faith present in the lives of cradle Baptists, especially those from a Southern Baptist background, can be summed up by the three themes associated with the DVD introduction to Christianity Living the Questions, which was used as part of the Adult Christian Education Program at First Baptist. It promotes a

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[23] See Lance D. Laird, "Becoming More Christian: Bearing Mutual Witness with Muslims," *Review and Expositor* 104, no. 1(2007): 59-74.

self-identified progressive form of Christianity that embraces mystery is a part of life, a commitment to social justice, and a desire to take Jesus seriously in the way one lives today. It was not uncommon, especially in relation to the resurrection, for interviewees to say "I don't know" and to express contentment at not knowing, it appears that ordinary believers can live with ambiguity and not be overly worried about not figuring everything out. Getting through life from day to day with God's help and the presence of Jesus consumes an ordinary believer's time and energy without any additional sense or felt need to look beneath the surface in order to conceptualize what is going on. The responses gleaned in interviews suggest that the practical christologies operative in everyday life do not probe ontological questions to any great depth. For example, if an interviewee declared that Jesus is God or God was somehow present and active in Jesus he or she made no attempt to explain how such a claim is true in the wake of Christian monotheism. No answer to McClendon's second christological question is offered in most everyday christologies. It was more important to them that they lived according to the Jesus story as they embraced it, whether that meant living out the Golden Rule or being alert for signs of the kingdom of God.

A large proportion of the sample interviewed at First Baptist were Christians that had begun to question the evangelical culture in which they had grown up or been immersed in during the early days of their finding faith in Jesus Christ. Gordon Lynch proposes a theory to explain the roots of questions that ultimately result in a movement away from evangelical faith:

> People start raising questions about their Evangelical beliefs, and their particular evangelical church, when they have some kind of encounter with someone or some kind of experience that challenges their previous Evangelical assumptions.[24]

Lynch suggests that two kinds of life experience are especially apt to challenge evangelical assumptions, namely, experiences that call into question the loving nature of God and the true nature of the Christian way of life.[25] At First Baptist several contingent elements contributed to questioning inherited evangelical modes of faith and issued in revised notion of Jesus.

First, a common theme in interviews at First Baptist (and a handful at Ruggles) is a conviction that Jesus and Christianity are frequently "hi-jacked" to justify causes and actions inconsistent with the way of Jesus, a practice associated with the Religious Right or Evangelical/Fundamentalist groups in the United States. Second, several interviewees reached the conclusion that an evangelical framework for understanding God and Jesus fails to make adequate sense of their life experiences. Third, ordinary believers from evangelical and Roman Catholic religious upbringings referred to behaviour within their originating denominations that denied Christian values. The misuse of power and authority, especially by church leaders, ranked high as a major obstacle to continuing with an inherited form of Christianity. Fourth, friendships with people from non-evangelical backgrounds that inspire respect and appreciation for the integrity of their character and lifestyle contribute to dislodging former exclusivist convictions. Fifth,

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[24] Gordon Lynch, *Losing My Religion: Moving on from Evangelical Faith* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2003), 18.

[25] Ibid., 17.

experiences of suffering that appear to deny straightforward affirmations about how God will help the person of faith can unsettle evangelical certainties. To experience or to witness suffering can raise questions about the nature of God's action in the world that challenges an evangelical/fundamentalist theological imagination. Sixth, an aesthetic preference for styles of music and liturgical patterns not normally associated with Contemporary Christian Music popular among evangelicals were reflected in comments on the practice of worship. Contemporary Christian music is often perceived as boring, simplistic, and emotionally unsatisfying. Seventh, a thirst to know how following Jesus makes a difference to life in all its complexity now, not simply in eternity, as a consequence of becoming aware of injustices in the United States and globally creates a sense of disquiet. Eighth, an aversion to evangelism (portrayed as the use of technique and/or misuse of power to convert people) was frequently cited as a cause for concern. Interviewees expressed fear that witness somehow constituted an unwarranted and unethical intrusion into a person's life. For all these reasons -- cognitive, affective, and volitional -- people had become alienated from an evangelical christology.

Explaining Tentative Christology

The tentative character of so many everyday christologies at First Baptist can be explained in terms of people moving on from evangelical faith or, in some instances a Catholic inheritance. Gordon Lynch (himself a person that has moved on from evangelical commitments) suggests that such a journey is akin to bereavement. The tone and content of much of the commentary on earlier, more conservative expressions of faith

in the life of an ordinary believer were generally quite critical. It is noteworthy, that nearly all the respondents came to faith in conservative religious backgrounds. First Baptist functions as a safe haven for people with an existing faith, who reject a particular Christian sub-culture (principally evangelicalism but also, for a small number, the Roman Catholic Church) to explore an alternative expression of Christianity. First Baptist is not primarily a missionary agent winning people to initial faith in Jesus Christ, but attracts Christians seeking to explore alternative versions of the Faith they confess.

In reflecting on the process of moving beyond evangelical faith, Dave Tomlinson observes:

> But I think often it starts with people's social attitudes, and their attitudes to the Church sub-culture as well, rather than with theological issues as such. But I think that it is a process that has inevitable theological outcomes. Once people, for example, find that they know gay people and that they actually have some sympathy with where they're coming from, although they maybe trying to hold tenaciously to a conservative view on homosexuality, in reality there's going to be an underlying momentum of change taking place in their beliefs.[26]

Lynch and Tomlinson make the same basic point. People that move beyond evangelical faith often begin the process by questioning aspects of evangelical sub-culture (Lynch and Tomlinson refer to changed attitudes towards gay and lesbian people) that ultimately point to a reconfiguration of theological convictions. John Berthrong makes a similar observation about the fact of religious pluralism:

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[26] Quoted in Gordon Lynch, *Losing My Religion? Moving on from Evangelical Faith* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2003), 79-80.

> The empirical fact that the girl next door in modern North America might well be a Hindu or a Buddhist makes the old view of Hinduism and Buddhism as reprehensible teachings less and less appealing,[27]

Getting to know a sincere and devout person committed to a different religion makes it harder, for some at least, to conceive of them as standing outside the borders of God's salvation. Berthrong openly concedes that this way of doing theology ends up being shaped decisively by a description of a social situation as it is.[28] "In academic terms, I stand accused of confusing factual description of what is happening with normative discourse about what religious people ought to believe."[29] Berthrong argues that "descriptive and normative judgements actually belong together in some cases."[30] He believes that the empirical reality of religious pluralism in North America teaches something normative about theology. God has created a plural world where different religions rise and fall with the passage of time. "Such a clear-eyed empirical and normative theology is needed by our churches."[31] McClendon, however, would challenge the notion that theology should permit its path to be dictated by social description.

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[27] John Berthrong, *The Divine Deli: Religious Identity in the North American Cultural Mosaic* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999), 21.

[28] Ibid., 136-141.

[29] Ibid., 136.

[30] Ibid., 140.

[31] Ibid., 147.

Conclusion: Forward in the Fullness of Christ

Jesus matters to ordinary believers in theory and practice at First Baptist Church in Jamaica Plain and Ruggles Baptist Church. He is no marginal figure or optional extra, but integral to each congregation's practice of worship and mission. Furthermore, the overwhelming majority of ordinary believers interviewed as part of the research for "Living with Jesus" consider Jesus to be vital to understanding what it means to be a Christian. One of the most striking features of the data is that the manner in which an ordinary believer apprehends Jesus makes a decisive difference to the way he or she conceives, practices, and experiences the Christian life. Three versions of the Jesus story and the corresponding christological convictions embedded in each were found to be operative in the lives of ordinary believers at First Baptist and Ruggles: evangelical christology (Jesus died for the forgiveness of sins), exemplarist christology (Jesus is the best example of how God wants us to love other people), and prophetic christology (Jesus proclaims and demonstrates the eschatological rule of God).

Each version of the Jesus story, along with its corresponding convictions, is simultaneously liberating and limiting. Evangelical christology with its stress on Jesus' death for the forgiveness of sins frequently bestows a sense of peace, joy, and forgiveness, powerful feelings experienced as truly liberating for an ordinary believer affected by restlessness, sorrow, and guilt. The same christology maintains a Biblical priority and balance in reminding the ordinary believer that the follower of Jesus is to love God first and then love one's neighbor. Yet, the very same christology is also limiting, because it says nothing about the kingdom of God (the burden of Jesus' ministry

in the Synoptic tradition in the New Testament) and focuses on the individual so much that the church becomes a mere instrument to enable the follower of Jesus to grow in a relationship with God. Exemplarist christology assumes that God can forgive without the cross and sees it mainly as an example to inspire Christ-like love for others in our lives today. The exemplarist model of the cross has less to say to the life that "knows" something is wrong, which cannot be repaired by human agency. By emphasizing the Golden Rule as the heartbeat of Jesus' teaching, exemplarist christology reduces the Christian life to a presumed sense of universal reciprocal morality. The transcendent reality of God is in danger of being squeezed out by a concern for human relations. Prophetic christology requires the ordinary believer to make sense of Jesus in his historical context and to acknowledge the place of social, political, economic, and religious factors at work in his life and ministry. Consequently, prophetic christology helps the ordinary believer today recognize the cost of following Jesus and remaining faithful to the kingdom of God. Prophetic christology directs attention to systemic evil opposed to the character and purposes of God, looks for signs of the kingdom of God, and seeks justice and peace that will transform the structures of church and society. It is not so well equipped to help the person looking to meet with God and to find forgiveness and hope in the face of his or her human brokenness and awareness of the fact of death.

An important conclusion to draw from the research data generated by "Living with Jesus" is that each of the three lived christologies identified reflects strengths and weaknesses. No one version of the Jesus story is complete and adequate on its own. The

associated convictions underlying and embedded in the different stories of Jesus current at First Baptist and Ruggles are pregnant with pastoral and missional implications.

Christological convictions, as is the case with all convictions, are complex, dynamic, interactive, and multi-layered. First, a conviction consists of cognitive, volitional, and affective components. Second, different versions of the Jesus story, and the corresponding convictions, intersect, sometimes conflicting and sometimes coexisting in both congregational and everyday christologies. Third, the christology articulated in the congregational practices of a church (worship and mission) can be at odds with the everyday christologies practiced by ordinary believers.

Evangelical disenchantment is a reality in the experience of a sizable group at First Baptist, which provides a safe space for such people to explore a different variety of Christianity. Although, the interviews at Ruggles gave no indication of evangelical disenchantment, clearly there are individuals struggling with aspects of evangelical christology and evangelical sub-culture. What does Ruggles have to say to those that are struggling with an evangelical christology?

The South African missiologist, David Bosch, cited at the beginning of Chapter Seven, argues that the church in mission needs "an interpretation of salvation which operates within a comprehensive Christological framework, which makes the *totus Christus* - his incarnation, earthly life, death, resurrection, and parousia – indispensable for church and theology."[32] Such an approach is required to address the complex reality of human existence in its personal and social realities and to do justice to the broad scope

[32] Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 399.

of God's purposes expressed in the life, death, resurrection, and on-going ministry of Jesus Christ. McClendon would agree with Bosch that a comprehensive vision of Jesus Christ that takes into account the total witness of the New Testament is essential for the church.

"Living with Jesus" shows that three different forms of practical christology are present across the congregational practices and everyday lives at First Baptist Church in Jamaica Plain and Ruggles Baptist Church. Each of the three versions of the Jesus story is a powerful narrative that intersects and impacts congregational practices and everyday lives. Placing each of the three types of practical christology in dialogue with James McClendon's academic christology has helped to identify their respective strengths and weaknesses. The issue at stake is not whether Jesus is taken seriously, but which version of the Jesus story is operative in a congregation's practices and the life of an individual Christian. None of the three practical or lived christologies (evangelical, exemplarist, prophetic) is sufficient. And, yet a *totus Christus* (a comprehensive christology) is unlikely to be created simply by cutting and pasting the various bits of each christological type. What the data suggest, however, is a need for each practical christology to be exposed to different perspectives on Jesus to test its underlying assumptions and the contents in relation to the witness of the New Testament. Indeed, the New Testament gives a clue to congregations and ordinary believers alike. The early church included Four Gospels or perspectives on Jesus. The New Testament also includes additional perspectives in the Epistles written by Paul and the writings attributed to John.

Moving forward in the fullness of Christ entails an intentional and disciplined effort to engage with perspectives on Jesus other than those that appeal to one's own perceived religious needs and questions. Failure to look beyond the version of the Jesus story that appeals to "me" or the community of faith that I belong to runs the risk of simply painting Jesus in a self-serving image, limiting his significance for the Christian life, restricting the horizons of worship, and reducing the number of entry points available for people to embark upon life as a follower of Jesus Christ. Engaging with alternative versions of the Jesus story has the potential to recover a more comprehensive and balanced christology. No attempt is made to offer a prescriptive blueprint to follow. Rather, four questions are proposed to simulate creative and critical thinking that relate to a congregation's practice of worship, mission, pastoral care, and Christian education.

1. *Worship*. What is said and left unsaid about Jesus in public worship?
2. *Mission*. Who is helped to faith in Jesus Christ by our version of his story?
3. *Pastoral Care*. Whose stories of faith get listened to at church?
4. *Christian Education*. Where are our blind spots in reading the Jesus story?

The answers to these questions may be troubling and prompt faithful disciples and congregations to pursue a direction that is unexpected, challenging, and costly. But, then, Jesus never said it would be easy to follow where he leads.

APPENDIX A

Interview Guide for Semi-Structured Individual Interviews with Members and Regular Participants in a Congregation[1]

Date:……..

Time Started:……..

Place:……..

Name:……

Address:……

Telephone:……..

Sex:……

Age Group: -19/ 20-29/ 30-39/ 40-49/ 50-59/ 60-69/ 70-79/ 80+

Marital Status:……

Family:……..

Occupation:……

Church Background:……..

Present Church Affiliation:…...……

Other Religious Affiliations:……..

[1] A framework for interviews proposed by Diane Stinton served as the building block for the interview schedule developed for "Living with Jesus". See Diane B. Stinton, *Jesus of Africa: Voices of Contemporary African Christology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 256-257.

1. When did you first learn about Jesus Christ?
   Further Prompts:
   How did you first hear about Jesus?
   Were there any people who were especially significant in telling you about Jesus?
   What did you learn about Jesus at that time?
2. In view of all you've said so far who is Jesus for you today?
   Further Prompts:
   When has Jesus Christ been most real and important to you?
   Do you associate Jesus Christ with any particular events in your personal life or the congregation you belong to?
   How do you experience Jesus in public worship?
   How do you experience Jesus in personal devotions?
   How do you experience Jesus in everyday life?
   What makes you confident that Jesus explains the experiences that you attribute to Him?
   What difference does Jesus make to your decisions?
   What practices (activities or rituals) seem to make Jesus 'near' to you?
   Do you talk to other people about Jesus Christ? If so, who?
3. Are there any main ideas about Jesus, or images of Jesus, that are especially meaningful to you?
   Possible prompt: There are many metaphors/pictures of God in the Bible that stem from a writer's personal experience, such as David the shepherd testifying to God as "shepherd,' or David the warrior addressing God as his "shield" and "fortress." Are there any such images of Christ that resonate specially with your experience?
4. Do you think Jesus is relevant to contemporary life? If so, how? If not, why not?
5. Have you read any books about Jesus besides the Bible? If so what do you recall about those books?
   Further prompts:
   Titles?
   Content – ideas about Jesus?
   Have you listened to any music about Jesus?
   Have you seen any movies about Jesus?
6. Do you use hymns or songs that focus on Jesus in your personal devotions and daily life? If so, what hymnbooks, songbooks, or other sources do these come from?
7. Have you encountered any ideas about Jesus that you consider to be unacceptable? If so, what are they? What are your reasons for disagreeing with them?
8. Are there any final comments you would like to make about the identity and significance of Jesus to you personally or to Christians today?

APPENDIX B

Interview Guide for Ordained Ministers (Clergy) in Pastoral Charge of a Congregation[2]

Date:……..

Time Started:……..

Place:……..

Name:……

Address:……

Telephone:……..

Sex:……

Age Group: -19/ 20-29/ 30-39/ 40-49/ 50-59/ 60-69/ 70-79/ 80+

Marital Status:……

Family:……..

Occupation:……

Church Background:……..

Present Church Affiliation:……

Other Religious Affiliations:……

[2] A framework for interviews proposed by Diane Stinton served as the building block for the interview schedule developed for "Living with Jesus". See Diane B. Stinton, *Jesus of Africa: Voices of Contemporary African Christology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 256-257.

Reflections on Personal Experience

1. When did you first learn about Jesus Christ?
   Further Prompts:
   How did you first hear about Jesus?
   Were there any people who were especially significant in telling you about Jesus?
   What did you learn about Jesus at that time?
2. In view of all you've said so far who is Jesus for you today?
   Further Prompts:
   When has Jesus Christ been most real and important to you?
   Do you associate Jesus Christ with any particular events in your personal life or the congregation you lead?
   What makes you confident that Jesus explains the experiences that you attribute to Him?
   What difference does Jesus make to your decisions?
   What practices (activities or rituals) seem to make Jesus 'near' to you?
3. Are there any main ideas about Jesus, or images of Jesus, that are especially meaningful to you?
4. Do you use hymns and/or songs that focus on Jesus in your personal devotions and daily life? If so, what hymnbooks, songbooks, or other sources do these come from?
5. Do you think Jesus is relevant to contemporary life? If so, how? If not, why not?

Reflections on Theological Formation and Pastoral Practice

6. Reflecting autobiographically, what do you think are the most formative influences in your life, which have shaped your theology? Are there any critical experiences that would help me to understand your theology better?
7. Which theologians have had the greatest impact on your own formulation of Christology - either positively or negatively? Please explain.
8. Are you wrestling with any Christological concerns at this point in time? Have you encountered any ideas about Jesus that you consider to be unacceptable?
9. What difference do your understanding and experience of Jesus Christ make to the way you practice pastoral ministry?
10. What do you seek to communicate about Jesus Christ to the congregation and to people with no involvement in church life?
11. How you think people in the congregation that you lead understand and experience Jesus Christ?
12. Are there any final comments you would like to make about the identity and significance of Jesus to you personally or to Christians today?

APPENDIX C

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Invitation to Participate in a Research Project

Title of Project

"Every Day with Jesus in Worship, Mission, and Daily Life: Christologies in Two Boston American Baptist Churches"

Dear

I am a student at Boston University School of Theology engaged in a research project as part of a program of doctoral studies, interested in hearing about people's experience and understanding of Jesus Christ in worship, mission, and daily life. The study I am conducting is concentrating on members of two congregations affiliated with American Baptist Churches USA in Boston.

For several weeks I have been taking part in the life of your congregation as part of the above mentioned research project. The next part of my program of study entails interviewing people about their experience and understanding of Jesus Christ. I am inviting you to participate in such an interview to share something of your experience and understanding of Jesus Christ in worship, mission, and daily life. Participation in the study is voluntary.

An interview consists of talking with me for about an hour. I will ask you a number of questions to facilitate conversation about how you experience and understand Jesus Christ. You do not have to answer every question and may discontinue your participation at any time in this interview.

I will contact you to discuss the possibility conducting an interview with you. Please feel free to ask me any questions you may have about what an interview entails. If you agree to be interviewed I will arrange a time and place at your convenience to conduct the interview. Before the interview commences I will review the procedure that the conversation will follow and you will have an opportunity to give your informed consent.

Yours Sincerely

Julian Gotobed

APPENDIX D

Informed Consent Form for Individual Interviews

Title of Project

"Every Day with Jesus in Worship, Mission, and Daily Life: Christologies in Two Boston American Baptist Churches"[3]

Researcher

Julian Gotobed, a student at Boston University School of Theology

Tel: 617-965-8453 E-mail: jgotobed@bu.edu

Professor Supervising Dissertation

Dr. Nancy Ammerman, Boston University School of Theology

Tel: 617-353-3066 E-mail: nta@bu.edu

Dear Participant

I am a student at Boston University School of Theology engaged in a research project as part of a program of doctoral studies, interested in hearing about people's experience and understanding of Jesus Christ in worship, mission, and daily life. I am conducting a study concentrating on members of two congregations affiliated with American Baptist Churches USA in Boston. The study will gather information and insights using interviews. I am inviting you to participate in this study. Participation in the study is voluntary.

The interview will consist of conversing with me for about an hour about your own experience and understanding of Jesus Christ. I will ask a number of questions to facilitate conversation about how you experience and understand Jesus Christ in worship, mission, and daily life. You are not required to answer every question and may discontinue your participation at any time in this interview without any penalty of any kind. I will audiotape our session. While I may use some quotes from our interview when I write up the results of the study, I will not use your name; any identifying information will be disguised. The audiotapes will be kept secure and confidential and will be destroyed after the study has been completed. If you decide that you would not like your story to be included in the study, you will have the right to withdraw.

[3] The title of the project changed to "Living with Jesus" after the fieldwork had been completed.

While there are no tangible benefits for participating in this research project, I hope that you will profit from this chance to explore the topic and tell your story. I expect that your participation will help sociologists, practical theologians, and pastors to understand better the lived experience of people in congregational life and daily life.

The research is being undertaken to meet doctoral requirements and will be written up in a dissertation that will be referenced in library databases and available through inter-library loan and dissertation publishing organizations. The dissertation may be published as papers or as a book.

There are no known risks to participating in this study. However, there is a slight possibility that for a few people talking about their experience and understanding of Jesus Christ in the context of worship, mission, and daily life could bring up some difficult emotions. Should this occur and you feel the need to seek assistance in dealing with these emotions, I will be available by telephone or e-mail if you want to talk about any of these reactions or would like information about other qualified professionals who might provide you with assistance.

You will be given a signed copy of the informed consent. If you have any questions about this research, you may contact Dr. Nancy Ammerman, the professor supervising the research, or me at the numbers above. You may also contact David Berndt, who is the Coordinator of the Institutional Review Board for Human Subject Research of the Boston University Charles River Campus, if you have any questions about your rights as a participant, at 617-353-4365. and dberndt@bu.edu.

Thank you very much.

Julian Gotobed: _____Date _____

I have read this form and agree to participate.

Signature: _____Date _____

I give my permission to tape record the interview.

Signature _____Date _____

APPENDIX E

Comparison of Components of Worship

Component	**First Baptist Church**	**Ruggles Baptist Church**
Shape	Hymn Sandwich	Hybrid
Music	Classical	Contemporary
Musicians	Lone Organist	Several Musicians
Singers	Choir	Two or three lead voices
Words	Hymnbook	Data Projector
Christology	Usually Explicit	Often Ambiguous
Seating	Free Standing Chairs	Fixed Pews
Posture	Little physical expression	Arms raised occasionally
National Flag	Absent	Displayed on rostrum
Space	Mobile Trailer	A Place of Worship
Impression	Confined/Intimate	Spacious/Detached
Regularity	Weekly	Weekly
Baptism	Open Air Service	Open Air Service
Communion	once per month	twice in four months
Bulletin	Detailed order of service	Skeleton order of service
Bible Version	New Revised Standard Version	New International Version
Scripture	Revised Common Lectionary	Text selected for series (Willow Creek Series)
Pastor's Dress Code	Gown and Stoll	Informal attire
Symbols	Carved wooden cross in front of lectern	Silver cross mounted on wall behind rostrum

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